

# HILDA of GRAY COT

Pemberton  
• Ginther •





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THE MOMENT HAD COME AND SHE WAS READY



HILDA  
OF GREY COT  
BY  
PEMBERTON GINTHER

Author of  
The "Beth Anne" Series

Illustrated by THE AUTHOR

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Hilda of Grey Cot

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*To my friend*

*ELINOR*

*in memory of many pleasant  
hours spent together*





## Introduction

HILDA's family belonged to the fashionable, wealthy class, so naturally she attended a select boarding school. But after being graduated she found that owing to financial reverses her mother had been forced to take an attractive but small house in the suburbs. Being a resolute girl, desirous of helping, Hilda entered into the spirit of things and told her mother that she wanted to be useful and not an idle waster. The first task she was given was to watch the strawberry jam and see that it did not burn. Hilda's intentions were good but the jam was burned. This, coming at the outset was a great blow, but Hilda, through many trials and tribulations, learned that she had the strength to endure and win out in the end.



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# Hilda of Grey Cot

## CHAPTER I

### JAM-POTS AND JUSTICE

A SUNNY morning in July with all the birds singing and the pink-and-white petals in the garden a-flutter in the soft breeze, and a great odor of strawberry jam floating out among the roses.

In the wide kitchen where the odor was the strongest, Hilda paused in her work on the heaped-up tray of fragrant red berries and drew a deep breath. On such a morning all must go well. She must tell her mother of her great plan at once, while the sun shone and the birds sang, but—it was hard to make a good start.

She looked toward her mother and then glanced hastily out through the open door. She cleared her throat with a tremulous little murmur.

“I’ve never seen such roses as in the old garden here,” she began. “I didn’t dream from your letters and what you told me at Commencement time that it was so sweet.” Here she stuck for a moment, trying to frame her opening speech.

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Mrs. Hare's eyes followed Hilda's glance out over the sunny stretch of smooth lawn that separated the kitchen precincts from the rose-garden. Her face was serene, in spite of all the sacrifices that had followed in the wake of the war.

"It was lovely here in May," she answered. "And it is really very comfortable, though it seems a bit small, after Uplands. I thought you might feel the contrast."

"It's adorable!" flashed Hilda. "I love it already. I wish you hadn't made me go off with the Finns to Cohasset after Commencement. I'd rather have been here, getting acquainted with this cozy little place. I'm more at home here in this one day than I ever was at Uplands with its stiff-starched gardens and immense terraces."

"And yet you were born there," her mother smiled as she sorted the ripe berries. "However, you will have ample time to get acquainted and perhaps to tire of it before we make a change. Uplands is leased for two years and will possibly be sold after that ——"

Hilda broke in eagerly. "I shan't mind that at all," she declared warmly, hoping to convince her mother that she, too, could endure sacrifices. "I'll spend the rest of my life at Grey Cot, if you wish. I'll never tire of it. I seem to fit in here perfectly. And, besides," she gulped and struck out recklessly,



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“I’d rather be here doing something,—something worth while, something you could help me with,—than in that big enormous house, where there were always so many people.”

She saw that she had failed in her approach to the Great Plan. Mrs. Hare was working daintily on the growing pile of berries, all unconscious of the tremendous meaning of those last words. She apparently thought Hilda was referring to gardening or housework, and she smiled somewhat absently as she pulled an empty dish toward her and began to fill it quickly, dropping the berries in one by one. Hilda groaned inwardly and tried again.

“I have never told you how glad I am that I’m not to come out this winter,” she said, going straight at it now. “I’ve got an idea for something worth while, and I hope you’ll let me do it. We’ve lost so much money this spring and you’ve done so much, . . . leaving Uplands and selling the limousine and the electrics and sending off Louis and the other servants, and coming to this dear tiny house with only John and Martha and that cute foursome,—(and not a bit of a martyr, either) that I felt I must do something. And Helen Finn’s father is an architect, you know, and Elizabeth Landis was graduated this year, and he says the sister-arts are just as much needed now as ever.

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Landscape gardening is lovely work and Mrs. MacAllister is willing."

Mrs. Hare's interest in the strawberries ceased. She lifted her eyes to her daughter's face in puzzled surprise. "But what in the world has Jean's mother to do with landscape gardening?" she questioned wonderingly. "And are you thinking of taking up architecture? It's a long course, I believe."

Once again Hilda broke in eagerly. "Not architecture," she corrected radiantly, "'Interior decoration.' You have such good taste. You could help a lot. The only trouble is, I'm not prepared. And Elizabeth wants to hang out the sign in the fall."

"But what has Mrs. MacAllister to do with it?" persisted Mrs. Hare, very much at sea among these disjointed facts. "And what sign are you talking about?"

Hilda pushed her pan of finished berries from her and faced her mother. The moment had come and she was ready. She had jumbled her opening sentences but she felt calmer now and knew that she could present a good case. She and Jean and Elizabeth had talked it over so many times since that first afternoon in the Finns' sun-parlor that nothing had been left unthought of.

"I want to help at home and do my share in the world-movement toward reconstruction,—to lay

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aside pleasure for a time and to take up duty instead," she announced, enjoying the phrases as keenly as at Commencement when reconstruction and responsibility were strong favorites with both Class Historian and Valedictorian. "I think that is everyone's plain duty now and ——"

She halted. Footsteps and an odd bumping sound announced Martha with the big brass preserving kettle. "I'll tell you later on," she ended abruptly and her mother's answering nod and smile made her feel that she had made a good beginning. She sprang to get the scales from the dresser, rather pleased with her method of attack. "She understands how I feel about it anyway," she told herself. "And that's half the battle."

Martha came panting in with the great gleaming brass kettle which had been her pride at Uplands and from which she had refused to be parted. "There," she said triumphantly. "The jam that's made in that will be fit for a President of the United States, and I can't say more. It's as pure as gold and as sweet as May-dew."

Hilda, to whom the kitchens at Uplands had been mysteries unexplored since pig-tail days, admired and praised the shining yellow kettle with all the ardor of a discoverer. Here was something within her knowledge,—her very recent knowledge of interior effects. "What a gorgeous spot of color it



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makes in this grey kitchen," she exclaimed. "There ought to be small pots just like it on the dresser and a bright brass teakettle on the range, to carry the same note throughout."

She hoped her mother would be impressed by her quick perception of color harmonies, but Mrs. Hare was already busy with the scales and fruit. She motioned Hilda to bring her tray to the other table where she was weighing out the ruddy berries. She glanced at Martha who was lighting the flaring jets of the gas range.

"Has John come back yet?" she asked.

Martha shook her head. "Indeed he hasn't, Mrs. Hare," she replied indignantly. "That garage man told him he'd have the lamp fixed and ready for him, but it's plain he's broke his word, as usual. I'll have to pick the peas myself, unless you need me."

Hilda interposed before her mother could reply. "I know all about jam. We went in heavy for preserves in the Domestic Science class this term. I believe I could make it with my eyes shut," she declared. "It's not a bit of trouble."

"You may go, Martha," smiled Mrs. Hare. "My new assistant seems very competent."

Martha smiling broadly went heavily out and Hilda, with a sense of coming conquest, poured the weighed sugar into the great kettle with a deft hand.

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She was glad she could show how competent she really was. "Twenty pounds, and now for the berries," she said gaily, but she caught herself up instantly. "No, of course, the sugar must melt," she added, laughing. "Don't call Martha back. I really do know all about it."

"I'll give you a fair trial," rejoined Mrs. Hare lightly. "If you spoil my jam, I'll make you pay for it,—this lot is for the Orphanage and those poor children need all the sweetness they can get."

Hilda laughed easily. "I'm not afraid," she boasted. "I'm only assistant, anyway." She was wondering how soon she might find another opening for the unfolding of her great plan.

The syrup was ready and the fruit was slipped into the bubbling kettle and the jam had begun to boil before a suitable moment came, but just as she cleared her throat, the telephone bell in the hall alcove tinkled insistently and she had to answer it.

She came back quickly. "Mrs. Jenks of the Orphanage Board must talk with you," she reported. "I'll take charge till you come back," and she held out her hand for the spoon.

Mrs. Hare hesitated. "Mrs. Jenks always talks an age," she said dubiously. "You'd better call Martha. Those Board people have no idea of time."

Hilda took the spoon gently but firmly. "I

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could make jam with my eyes shut," she declared. "I'll bring it out right or I'll pay for every berry and every ounce of sugar I spoil. Do hurry, or Mrs. Jenks will think up a lot more to say," and she fairly pushed her mother toward the door.

Mrs. Hare paused a moment on the threshold, a gleam of amusement in her eyes, but at Hilda's eager gesture she went on, throwing a last word over her shoulder. "I'll hold you to that bargain, my dear," she called. "The orphans need all they can get."

Left alone Hilda moved about with the confidence of the conqueror. She skimmed the bubbling fruit dexterously, turning up the gas to its fullest,—she liked a brisker flame than her mother used. She had seen jam made so often in the Domestic Science classes that she found it ridiculously easy.

"Jam is the simplest thing in life," she told herself complacently. "I could make it without half trying."

After she had skimmed the rosy foaming fruit she set down the refuse-dish and turned a long absent look on the sunny, tempting out-of-doors, more from habit than interest. All her thoughts were centered on the presentation of her cherished plan and she exulted in its attractions, as the child of her own brisk brain. "She ought to like it," she told



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herself. "It's up-to-date and it's feminine, too. House and Home, Woman's True Sphere, and all that. She surely ought to like it."

The plan had really been started by her, although there had been much alteration and amendment since that first afternoon in Finns' sun-parlor when the three girls had been discussing their separate futures. Hilda's brain was teeming with vague ideas of economy to fit her altered life, none of which had taken shape. Jean had confessed to a desire to join her twin brother Hal who was with the Kosciusko Squadron but had frankly acknowledged that the eastern war front was forbidden by Mrs. MacAllister. "Which leaves me free for almost anything," she had drawled cheerfully. Elizabeth Landis, twenty-five and just graduated, had daringly announced her intention of opening an architect's office in the fall, with full consent of her family and promises of support from her many relatives.

It was this spark which had blown up Hilda's indefinite future. All her airy ideas as to general helpfulness had scattered before Elizabeth's words, and the magnificent plan had come crashing down out of blue infinity. She had cried out for a partnership, with Elizabeth as the pivot and with the other two as auxiliaries. Her love for fixing up her rooms at Willoughby elected her to the post of

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Interior Decorator, and Jean's hasty consideration of the art of landscape gardening had convinced her that she had found her life-work. The partnership was complete, save as to some trifling details such as the study and equipment of the two junior partners.

Jean had waved her own deficiencies airily aside. She spoke of a course at Cornwells, only a step from their summer home, where she could be instructed. Coaching, also, was not unknown to that proud assembly of scenic authorities. Jean's claim that she could be quite ready for the partnership by September seemed valid. The only obstacle to the perfect triangle lay in Hilda's path. Would her mother consent? And, if she would, where could a good, cheap instructor be found in the neighborhood of Grey Cot? For Hilda vowed, sensibly enough, that she would not tax her mother further for a summer course or for expensive private lessons. They had patched the gap up with leaky plans for ardent study of technical magazines but they all felt this to be the only weak spot in the whole beautiful arrangement. Hilda had hoped that the talk with her mother would bring the solution and she chafed at the delay, while she dreaded the outcome. Suppose she should say that it was impractical?

"Oh, surely she ought to like it," Hilda repeated rather less confidently. Somehow her mother at

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Grey Cot seemed, strangely enough, more efficient, more energetic than the efficient, energetic mistress of Uplands had been. Perhaps it was because the accessories,—servants, guests, possessions,—had been removed, giving a clearer view of her central figure, but, however it was, Hilda felt a new admiration for her charming mother,—an admiration that added anxiety to her suspense. She wanted to please and satisfy her.

She drummed absently with the spoon as she let her mind drift back over all the arguments she would use. She wished Jean and Elizabeth were there to support her. She sighed deeply, and with the sigh she drew in a strange acrid odor. She turned with a little cry to see Martha hurry in at the back door, drawn by the same pungent smell. On the brightly burning gas range the big brass kettle was bubbling and frothing to its summit, little sharp puffs of evil-smelling smoke issuing from every foaming bubble.

“The jam’s burnt,” cried Martha. “My land!”

Hilda followed her to the kettle and peered into the ruddy froth, gasping at the whirls of choking smoke, as Martha turned off the light, and poking it with the big spoon. Smitten with remorse she poked about among the bubbles. “It’s ruined!” she lamented. “Oh, Martha, it’s all spoiled,—every bit of it.”



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Martha nodded grimly. She had her opinion as to unskilled labor though she did not voice it. "It's sure burnt up," she agreed tersely. "It's only fit for the gobbage-can now."

Hilda, sniffing the seething mass as it subsided into a red, tempting surface, shuddered at the nauseating smell. "It's sickening, positively sickening," she wailed, flinging the spoon into the sink. "It's abominable. Here, help me dump it out ——"

She started at the sound of her mother's step and she turned tragically as Mrs. Hare hurried into the kitchen. She knew her failure had been heralded on the soft summer breeze and her voice was poignant as she cried, "I've burnt the jam!"

Mrs. Hare came into the wide, sunny kitchen with a serious face, not noticing Martha's pantomime as to the wreck. "So you really couldn't do it after all," she exclaimed regretfully. "I am so sorry."

Her sympathetic tone made Hilda wince. She was much more ashamed of her poor performance than if her mother had been annoyed. "But I'll pay for it,—every bit," she declared eagerly. "I'll make another lot, too, to show that I can do it. I'll make it right away,—after I can get more berries."

"Not in this kettle," Martha interposed firmly. "It'll take many an hour's soaking to soften this

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crust at the bottom of the pot. You'll have to use other utensils than this here, Miss Hilda."

Mrs. Hare glanced at the kitchen clock. "Whatever is to be done will have to wait until later," she said quietly. "I have some sewing to do before luncheon and Martha will want the kitchen in a few minutes. I see John coming in. Go tell him to finish the pea-picking, Martha, while you clear away these things. Come, Hilda, you can help me with the nightgowns for the Orphanage."

Hilda followed her mother to the little room where the piles of cut garments were waiting. She put her hand in her pocket and then drew it out again hastily, a deep flush slowly spreading over her face. She braced herself for confession.

"I'll pay for the burnt jam, Mother, and I'll make it again, too. But," and here she gulped, "I'll have to draw on my next allowance. My cash never stretches over more than half the month and it's the fifteenth now, you know."

There was an uncomfortable little silence before her mother spoke, and the tiny pause gave her words added emphasis. "One of the first duties that we owe the world is the best use of our money," she said gently.

Hilda blushed deeply but she answered bravely, "I know, Mother dear, and I am honestly going to do better after this. I'll turn over a new leaf and

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begin this very day," she hesitated, "that is, I'll have to wait till the end of the month to begin with the actual money but I'll begin in my mind this moment."

"How about the jam for the orphans? That can't wait till the end of the month." Mrs. Hare smiled but she did not offer to advance the sum for the lost treat. Hilda's eyes dropped and she had no reply. She had hoped to win favor for her plan by her skill as a jam-maker but now she felt defeated at the very outset.

"Couldn't I do some work,—some sewing, anything that couldn't scorch," she murmured. "I could pick some vegetables or cut the grass ——"

Mrs. Hare's clear laugh cut her short. "John would have to go with you to show you what to pick, and as for the grass, he does it very well. I think, my dear, you'd best try something indoors. How about these gowns? I've promised them for Friday and they aren't touched. I was going to get Miss Jones to help but she is busy. Do you think you can earn the sum I was going to pay her? It's very simple work and you know how to run a sewing-machine, I believe."

Hilda jumped at the suggestion. She had learned to sew recently at the Cohasset Defense Society,—a wartime hang-over, Jean called it,—and she was very proud of her skill with the treadle. "I'll be



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awfully glad to do it," she promised earnestly. "And I'll be frightfully careful this time. Please show me how they go together and I'll do them all."

Mrs. Hare showed her how the simple pattern fitted together, where the pockets went on, and how deep a hem was wanted. Then she rose. "We won't haggle over the price," she said brightly. "If you manage these for me by Friday I will be quite satisfied. This work will just about pay for the burnt jam."

Hilda understood that she was being paid generously and she showed her gratitude not only in warm words but by plunging into the work at once, only glancing up to nod emphatically as she added, "I'll finish these on time. You'll see. I wish you'd let me do the jam again, though."

"I think we'll ——" began Mrs. Hare, when a noise outside made them both turn their heads. The sound of a motor was heard beyond the hedge, and someone was coming up the walk between the tall box-bushes. As the figure turned the corner toward the little room, Hilda cried out in surprise, rising and running to the door.

"Jean! Jean MacAllister!" she exclaimed. "Why aren't you in Maine? You said you were going straight there from Cohasset."

Tall, lanky Jean grinned and shook hands

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heartily,—she was not given to demonstrations. “You don’t seem bubbling over with joy at the sight of me,” she drawled. “I did go to Maine, but I didn’t have to stay there, did I? How’s business? Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Hare? I’ve come to see about this new partnership of ours. I just got news that Hilda needs to hear.”

It was so sudden that Hilda gasped. Mrs. Hare seemed less taken aback, although she showed surprise. “Partnership?” she questioned. “Is that what Hilda was going to tell me about?”

Jean faced about again. “Haven’t you told her *yet*?” she demanded. “How in creation have you kept it in?” Then, with more briskness than usual to her, she turned to Mrs. Hare. “We three,—Elizabeth and Hilda and I want to be partners in a paying business, Mrs. Hare,” she said soberly. “I’ve got my course all mapped out and Mother willing to help. My work doesn’t come in, anyway, till after the houses are built. It’s like Hilda’s in that. And I’ve a promise of a contract for a bungalow, garden, bath-house and all, up on the coast if the partnership goes through. Elizabeth has a little summer cottage to build for her cousin,—partnership again. So the business end of it is all right. As to Hilda’s being ready for the Interior Decorator end of it by fall, I’ll vouch for that, too.”

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Hilda made a strange sound in her throat but Jean went on unheeding. "Mother has a white-whiskered friend, a Mr. Dalton, who used to play Jacks or something with her centuries ago, and he's a perfect encyclopedia on periods and fabrics and, oh well, everything that's beautiful and right. He'll show Hilda the art of furnishing, if you will let her study with him. He's really a wonder. And he won't take a cent,—old times, you know, and all that."

Hilda clasped her hands so hard it hurt but she would not utter a word. She meant to let Jean make the appeal. She sat in tense expectancy while Mrs. Hare put many questions to which Jean gave thorough replies. The solution of the problem of study had been marvelously solved but there were many things to be considered.

After Jean had ended, Mrs. Hare sat for a short while in silence, while Hilda watched her eagerly, hardly breathing in her suspense. When she spoke her voice had a tone that revived Hilda's sinking heart.

"All this is very unexpected, of course, but life moves rapidly and we must move with it," she began. Then she turned to Jean with a changed look. Hilda could not decide whether it was more hopeful or less encouraging. "We'll think it over and telephone you, my dear," she said with decision.



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“We can decide in an hour. Where can we reach you at twelve?”

Jean rose and shook hands. “Twelve’s the hour,” she responded heartily. “But I’ll be at odd spots, so I’d best call you. Now I’m off,—got a lot of errands for Mother. Good-bye and thank you, Mrs. Hare,” and she was gone without another word to Hilda.

As the chug of her motor died into the distance, Mrs. Hare led the way to the library and Hilda followed with a sense of something final in the air,—a climax that might include the whole morning,—burnt jam and all.

Mrs. Hare seated herself at the desk, and drew out books and papers while Hilda’s sense of climax grew. As soon as the papers were laid in a neat pile Mrs. Hare spoke quietly and seriously, looking straight into Hilda’s eyes with her clear gaze.

“This plan of you three girls seems a practical enough opportunity for a trial of your abilities,” she said. “I feel that you should at least have the chance of testing it. I am going to agree to your having a share in the project,—under certain conditions.”

Hilda’s heart leaped and then sank. She did not know what hard problem she might confront and she found no words to reply. She waited nervously.

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“ I hope you will feel I am quite fair in asking what I shall ask,” her mother went on with a touch of almost wistful kindness in her tone. “ You may begin your study with the understanding that if, in two months’ time, your allowance is overdrawn or your accounts unbalanced, you will cheerfully and promptly give up the thought of having any share in this partnership.”

“ Is that all? ” broke out Hilda in great relief. “ Oh, I’m so glad it’s only that! I thought you had a program of good works that would end my chance. I’m so thankful it is only that! I can promise easily, oh, so easily! ”

Mrs. Hare smiled but her eyes grew sober as she touched the books and papers. “ I am going to start you on a new schedule,—a fresh page,” she said. “ I have been only waiting for your return. Since everything is now so uncertain, I have begun to realize that you should understand the management of your own affairs for yourself. I am going to put a certain sum into your hands to administer as you will. I have here the papers for the amount invested for you, the income of which is available for your use. Mr. Lanford attended to it for me, and it is all clear and straight. Here are the papers. Your income,—which will have to suffice you for everything save your actual board and lodging here,—will be about a hundred dollars a month. We are

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not, as I have said, very poor, but compared with our past we are compelled to economize very closely indeed. You have not known the value of money. It may prove hard for you. However, both Mr. Lanford, who is a shrewd lawyer, and I feel that it is enough for any sensible girl of seventeen in a comfortable home in these times. I hope you will get on well with it."

Hilda had herself together now and realized what had happened. The climax was better than she had imagined. She was to be started off with her allowance of new income just when her purse was very flat. She had no memory of what she had lived on before this but she knew that she should manage gloriously on the hundred in her hand. She jumped up and kissed her mother ardently.

"Oh, I'll do beautifully," she prophesied. "I'll get through with a margin, too. I'll surprise you. I have so much to try for *now*."

"It is in your own hands," replied her mother, returning the embrace. "You shall be interior decorator as long as you please, if you can show a clean record each month, but if you burn the jam,"—they both laughed here,—"you will have to come back to being just a plain girl. That is the bargain, isn't it?"

"It's only plain justice," responded Hilda. "I don't deserve to be a business person if I can't keep



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my funds straight. You're letting me down very easily, Mother dear."

Mrs. Hare laughed again and her voice had a relieved note. "I'm glad you feel that way about it," she said brightly. "And I do hope that it will be as easy as you expect."

"Oh, it's going to be pitifully easy," declared Hilda, exultantly. "Money is such a contemptibly unimportant matter. I shall soon have it under perfect control, now that I've turned my attention to it."

She glanced toward the tall hall clock and then her eyes rested on the blue papers that her mother's slim fingers still held. She put out a resolute hand to receive her new responsibilities and her voice rang gaily as she cried, "Oh, it's going to be pitifully easy! I wish Jean would 'phone this very instant!"

## CHAPTER II

### HILDA BUYS HER GLOVES

“AND now I must be taken to the Orphanage at once,” said Mrs. Hare. “I’ve overstayed my time and am disgracefully late.”

She paused on the lower step of the neat, red-brick home of Hilda’s new instructor, Mr. Dalton, which, in spite of the more pretentious houses about it, had a very pleasing air. Hilda had liked it at once.

Jean claimed Mrs. Hare before Hilda could speak. It was a game they always played when possible. “I’m going your way, Mrs. Hare, and I’ll have you there in a jiffy,” she said quickly. “Hilda’s so dazed with joy that she’d climb the first trolley she meets,—you’re much safer with me. She has her books and instruments to get, too.”

Mrs. Hare stepped into Jean’s big machine at the curb, smiling at the radiant Hilda who held the door for her. “I suppose you’ll get back in time for dinner?” she asked gaily. “As a prospective member of a business firm you are bound to be punctual and precise, you know.”

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Hilda rippled in response. The pleasant banter added to her delightful sense of reality of the facts.

"I'm crazy to get these things," she confessed, laughing. "I'll go straight to Dunn's and get the books, and then stop at Wright's for the drawing things. I'll get those brown gloves for you, too, Mother,—Watson's is on the way home."

She waved gaily as the big car swept away and then she turned to the neat blue foursome, with her heart singing within her.

"I'm really started now," she thought with a thrill. I'm part of that new life-tide the lecturer spoke of. . . . It's going to be so easy, too."

She smiled at the memory of the pleasant middle-aged gentleman who was to guide her through the maze of Adams and Empire styles, to teach her to distinguish instantly between Heppelwhite, Chipendale or Sheraton, to enlighten her as to India or Chinese chintzes, English crockery, Spanish leatherwork, French tapestries and wall-decoration in general, with a side-light on the history and construction of stained glass, both modern and ancient. Mr. Dalton had promised to perform the miracle of making her ready to undertake the partnership in the early fall.

And Hilda entirely believed him. She knew that her life among objects of rare and costly furnishings had prepared her somewhat for this ad-



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venture. "I'm glad Mother taught me to have an interest in tapestry and pictures, for it all helps now," she thought as she slammed the car-door and sank on the cushioned seat. "And I'll study every minute of my time. I won't waste a single second."

Planning happily she put the car to the speed limit and made a swift flight to Dunn's where she secured the books recommended by Mr. Dalton. Then she hastened to Wright's and got her drawing materials. The shining new instruments were very enlivening to her imagination, and she saw herself in a rosy future using compass and T square with such skill that she felt she deserved none but the best. She came out of Wright's with another large receipted bill in her pocket.

"I'll make it up easily," she thought complacently. "It isn't as though I were going to buy new instruments every week. These will last the rest of my life, I fancy."

This reasoning made her feel that she had done well in stocking herself for all those long years that stretched before her in such pleasing perspective, and she almost forgot the gloves she intended to buy for her mother. A glance at her wrist watch told her that she had but five short minutes before the closing hour.

"I can make it if I fly," she said as she swung the car out among the traffic. "It's a mercy that

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Watson's is just around the corner and that Miss Briggs is so obliging."

She made it in exactly two minutes and breathlessly made known her need of Miss Briggs to a decorative damsel with huge side-bobs and suppressed chewing-gum, who waved her wearily away, and without looking up called in a flat voice, "Miss Carter, customer!" And then went on with her work of straightening up for the night. It was plain that mid-July at Watson's glove counter was not her ideal of bliss.

Hilda hurried to the other end of the counter, looking in vain for the kind elderly face so familiar from years of shopping at Watson's. The gong was sounding in the far-off upper floors and she knew her errand must be accomplished at once if it was to be done at all. She tugged at the sample of pale brown tissue that stuck in her pocket, while she ran her eyes over the three or four saleswomen all bent on the business of putting away boxes and exhibits on shelves and under the counter. No one looked up at her, and she was about to speak rather crisply to the bent back nearest her when, from behind a tall glove-stand a small slim girl came smiling toward her, a girl with a soft knot of light hair at the back of her shapely head, and a remarkably low sweet voice.

"May I wait on you?" she asked, more as

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welcoming a guest than serving a belated customer.

Hilda beamed her relief. The indifference of the others made her doubly grateful. "I'm awfully late. Will you have time?" she responded gratefully. "I couldn't find Miss Briggs,—thank you, here's the color, and long gloves, please. You're awfully good."

The girl's smile was cordiality itself as she took the sample and began a businesslike, swift search of the boxes on the shelves at the back of the counter. "I'm right glad to wait on you," she said, simply. "Miss Briggs has left and I'm taking her place. You take about a six, I reckon."

"How in the world could you tell?" asked Hilda impulsively. "Most people measure and measure and then don't get it right."

The girl smiled as she brought a box to the counter. "I thought your hands were about my size," she explained, unfolding the tissue wrappers to disclose just the gloves Hilda wanted. Her hands were slender and delicate and she moved her fingers with a swift precision which bespoke a trained and intelligent mind. Hilda was struck with the difference between her movements and those of the other saleswomen about her.

She watched her with growing interest as she made out the check and handed the gloves to the



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wrapper in the cage above the counter, and then turned to complete her own work of closing up for the night. She felt that there was something unusual and puzzling in her presence at Watson's glove counter. She simply could not help staring. When the envelope with the gloves was in her own hands, a sudden impulse made her put a very direct question.

"Are you really used to this sort of thing,—selling gloves and all that?" she asked with a warm interest that robbed the inquiry of any impertinence. "You don't seem to belong here, somehow."

The moment the words left her lips, she felt that she had been very abrupt and personal, but the girl did not seem to share the feeling. She turned to Hilda with a flush of pleasure. She seemed to recognize the ring of comradeship in the tone and she responded to it with quick candor. Her face blossomed into sudden beauty as she spoke.

"I've been here only a week," she said in her soft low voice. "It really is mighty interesting work, if one only looks at it in the right way. It's wonderful how much real plain human nature one sees behind a counter like this."

Hilda felt a flash of admiration for the ease with which her question had been handled. The girl had answered it in a way that took the personal element from the situation and yet very plainly showed that

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she did not belong here. Another swift impulse, born of this admiration, caught her and carried her quite away. She determined to know more of this unusual girl.

“Won’t you let me run you home to make up for keeping you beyond the time? I’ve delayed you, you know,” she said eagerly. “Our car is outside and ——”

The gong was sounding insistently near by now, and Hilda’s sentence was cut in two by the polite floor-walker, but she halted long enough to clinch the matter by saying positively as she moved off, “I’ll wait on Clinton Street by the side door,” and then she went swiftly with the few other belated shoppers who were hastening toward the exit, smiling to herself at the success of her sudden impulse.

Out on Clinton Street in the warm sunshine she waited with the same smile on her lips. She liked having her way in small things like this and the novelty of the thing piqued her interest. She forgot entirely the virtuous task she had planned for herself at home for this very half hour.

When, after a few minutes, the girl joined her at the curb, she was even better satisfied with herself. Her new acquaintance was most attractive in her quiet street dress and her face glowed prettily under her smart little hat. She looked younger and fairer out here in the sunlight of the July afternoon, and

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the air of distinction, the intelligence and grace of her movements, were more emphasized. She was the sort of girl Hilda would expect to find in luxurious, happy surroundings, far removed from the drudgery of a modern department store.

Hilda took a long, sideways look at her as she stepped into the car, and her wonder grew. The address of the modest suburb added to her curiosity, but she kept her feelings to herself while they were in the thick of the traffic and chatted lightly of anything that came to her lips though her mind was busy beneath her gay sentences. When they were on the open road, however, another sidelong inspection of her companion made her burst out again in spite of herself.

“Don’t tell me you belong in that store!” she cried. “You simply can’t—you are so totally different. You are—well, you’re just sweet!”

A little queer sound in the girl’s throat halted her. She felt she had been too impetuous and she flushed a rosy red. Almost unconsciously she laid a hand on the other’s arm.

“Please don’t mind me,” she said. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,—really I didn’t. It was silly to say such things. Where one is doesn’t matter at all, does it? It’s what one is, after all.”

She had an uneasy sense that she had not made matters much better and she quickly turned all her



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attention to the roadway which was fortunately being repaired just here. She hated herself for her offensive words. "She'll never want to see me again," she thought ruefully.

"I think you have never been in a place where you didn't really fit," said the girl, very unexpectedly. "You wouldn't talk that way if you had."

Hilda almost stalled the engine in her surprise. She turned eagerly to flash a sympathetic look at her new friend, but she had the strength of mind not to open her lips, understanding that the other girl was going to say more.

"It isn't the glove counter, or the people or the work, you know," the girl went on in her soft voice. "I reckon I'd get used to all that. But it's the way they act toward me,—as if I were a sort of enemy. I've seen mountain folks act that way to strangers, but they're always looking for government agents, you know." She laughed a sad little ripple. "I just can't get used to it. When they aren't downright unfriendly,—like that Miss Mullens with the big hair-puffs,—they're so cold. It's mighty lonesome."

She paused, but Hilda merely gave her another friendly look and kept her attention on the road, delighted with the sudden sense of intimacy with this attractive mysterious girl.



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“Do you believe it,—there hasn’t been a single soul who has said more than two words to me since I went there,” she went on more earnestly. “You can’t tell how I felt when you asked me to ride home with you. It was mighty like heaven, I can tell you. To talk to someone who—who ——” she cut short her emotion with another little ripple. “Sounds like a regular old owl, doesn’t it?” she ended brightly. “But you know what I mean.”

Hilda nodded. “I know,” she responded, and the look they exchanged melted all her reserve again. She faced about, flinging caution to the winds. “Tell me,” she spoke vigorously, “tell me why you are in that store,—where you don’t belong? Why are you lonely? Haven’t you anyone,—any family?”

The other looked down twisting her fingers together as though in doubt, but in another instant she looked up again and straight into Hilda’s eyes.

“Will you promise not to tell anyone?” she questioned. “Not anyone at all? I shouldn’t want Carter to hear of it for the whole world.”

This sounded like melodrama and Hilda had never come close enough to melodrama to recognize it,—apart from moving pictures. “Oh, I’ll never breathe it,” she vowed. “Never. Not to a living soul!”

Her ardor satisfied the other. She drew a deep

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breath and sank back more comfortably. "It'll be mighty nice to talk it out with someone," she confessed. "It's most three months now since Carter went, and he's the only family I've got left. I couldn't talk to strangers, you know."

"Of course not!" agreed Hilda heartily. "But we're not strangers. We're going to be good friends." She was eager for the mystery, and she slowed the car to a crawling pace. "Do tell me all about it," she urged warmly.

The other smiled at her, a very pleasant smile. "I reckon I ought to begin at the usual beginning," she said. "Names come first, don't they? My name is Page Carter and our family comes from Princess Anne."

Hilda knew enough of Virginians to understand that her new friend was speaking of the county and not the town or village of her birth. "My name is Hilda Hare," she volunteered in return. "I live with my mother in Grey Cot, a little place over on the other side of town. I've just come home and I'm going to study Interior Decoration so as to go into a partnership with two other girls in the fall." She poured out this information, not because she hoped to encourage Page Carter, but simply because she could not keep it to herself. Nevertheless it had its effect. Page leaned forward and began to talk.

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Hilda, hoping for melodrama, listened eagerly, but she found only a story of sisterly, unselfish love. Page said her brother Carter had been with a city firm for a while. Then he had an offer to go to South America for six months, and Page had insisted on his going. She was to stay at the Marta-Marie where she had some slight acquaintances. All went well at first. Carter had written that he had found a splendid opening but would have to save hard. He joked about living on seventy-five cents a day in order to be a millionaire in a year but Page knew he was straining every nerve to make the needed sum at the appointed time. She had expected to save and send some money to him, but the letter from her new trustee telling of the bank failure had dashed that hope. It had done some other things, too.

It had made Page leave the Marta-Marie and find a cheap boarding-house. "Of course, I couldn't tell poor darling Carter that my money was gone," she said, simply. "He's just got to go into that partnership,—you know that."

Hilda knew it very emphatically. "Of course," she agreed warmly. "He must do that. Go on, please."

Page went on to tell of her sudden realization that she must find money somewhere, since she wouldn't call on her brother in this crisis. "It



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came over me all at once," she explained. "I thought, 'Suppose I get ill?' I couldn't pay a doctor. I reckon it was that owl on my window-sill one night that made me think of that, like a warning, you know. Owls mean sickness or death and an owl right in town was mighty disturbing to me." She sighed. "The glove counter at Watson's was all I could get but it'll keep me going till Carter gets on his feet."

Hilda wanted to dispute the superstition of the owl but her brain was full of whirling plans. "You won't need to stop at the glove counter," she said. "Mother knows tons of people and a private secretary would suit you ——"

"I did not give you my confidence in order to obtain help," said Miss Page Carter with dignity. "Your promise was given, I believe."

Hilda bore the dash of cold water bravely but her ardor did not cool. She felt that some good would come to Page, whether she desired it or not. She determined to take her mother down to Watson's the very next day, keeping her vow in the letter if not in the spirit. She made amends to her new friend and parted from her at the curb of a rather shabby little detached house with great good feeling on both sides.

"You've been mighty kind to me," Page said seriously as she shook hands and stepped lightly



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out on the narrow strip of concrete that led to the meagre frame house. "I've enjoyed the ride,—and the talk," she added smiling. "I hope I'll see you again."

"You surely will," responded Hilda. "I'm coming over here to see you very soon, and you'll be coming over to see us. You'll find Mother perfectly wonderful. She's not a bit like me. I'll keep my promise, though, and not tell her about you till you come."

Page had shrunk at the mention of a visit but brightened again at these words. It was plain she meant to keep her seclusion as close as possible. "You're mighty kind," she repeated, as Hilda started the car. Then she turned and ran lightly up the steps of the porch, where she halted for a farewell wave.

Hilda was smiling as she drove through the lengthening violet shadows toward Grey Cot. "I knew there was something different about her the moment I laid eyes on her," she thought as she sped along. The sense of having guessed right, added to the zest of her enlistment in the ranks of world-workers, made life almost too perfect. No memory of burnt jam darkened the sunny landscape of her mind. The only faint shadow was her pledge to Page Carter, and even that was a fleeting one.

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“Something will happen to take her away from that horrid glove counter,” she told herself as she turned into the curving street that led to Grey Cot. “I feel it in my bones that she won’t stay there long.”

She ran the car neatly into the garage back of the rose-garden and jumped gaily out, diving into the back seat for her parcels. The world was a very agreeable place indeed. The box of instruments alone was proof that the future held much in store for her.

John met her questions tolerantly. “Mrs. Hare hasn’t come in yet. Martha says she ’phoned that she’d be late,” he told her. “Shall I take them packages for you, Miss Hilda?”

She shook her head. “I’ll take them every one myself, John,” she said joyously. “I’ve got to learn to do things for myself now. Beside, they’re very, very precious.”

She went singing up the stair to her room. She meant to try the new instruments on the new paper the first instant she was free from the sewing-machine, and her mother’s delay meant much to her. She could not resist taking off the wrapping papers and exulting in the implements of her chosen profession, but she did not waste any time after that first glimpse.

She ran down to the sewing-machine with a new

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liking for the prosaic work she found there. It not only lulled the awakening memory of her failure into oblivion,—it gave her a feeling of sharing the sordid realities of life with Page Carter and all the vast army of the employed.

“This strong coarse stuff that the Board insists on the poor dears having for their nightgowns isn’t so bad,” she said smiling to herself. “It’s like the strong garment of brotherhood that shall clothe the world. . . .” She was rather proud of this fancy and she worked rapidly, humming as she sewed. She finished her portion of work just as the clock sounded the half hour; then she ran lightly up to her treasures.

“I’ll try a little sketch of a girl’s room, just to see what I can do,” she planned. “I’ll do it after dinner and—— Oh, there’s Mother now! I’ll simply have to hop!”

She raced through her dressing and was in the hall before John, announcing dinner, had reached the library where her mother was busy with letters and papers. She ran before him but halted in the doorway. Mrs. Hare was sitting with a letter in her hand, staring at it thoughtfully.

“Oh, it isn’t any bad news, is it?” Hilda broke out impulsively. Something in her mother’s look disturbed her.

Mrs. Hare turned, nodded to John in the back-



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ground, and then as he disappeared, she raised her eyes to Hilda.

"Not exactly bad news, my dear," she said. "But it may take me away for a while. Cousin Alice Whildin has been very ill out in Detroit and she wants me to come out to help her. It seems she has never forgotten that fortnight she spent with us when she had neuralgia."

"But you won't go," cried Hilda dismayed. "Away out there, and you hardly know her after all. I don't see how she can ask it."

"She doesn't ask it," explained Mrs. Hare gently. "Her nurse writes that she talks constantly of the comfort she got with us, and suggests, merely suggests that if I can, I come for a short visit. Cousin Alice is in a very low nervous state, it seems, and much depends on her being cheered and diverted."

"Then you'll go," declared Hilda. "I know you will. You're always doing just what people want you to."

Mrs. Hare laughed out gaily. "Not always, it seems," she retorted. "How about that partnership? I didn't respond too easily to that, did I?" She added more seriously as they went toward the dining-room, "I will write to Miss Miller for more exact details before I pack my bag, so we shan't be parted for a while yet."



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“Thank goodness,” exclaimed Hilda. The glove counter rose before her again. “Thank goodness.”

## CHAPTER III

“WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE”

“How does it look?”

Hilda asked the question in mingled anxiety and hope.

It was the next morning and she had brought her effort of the night before to show her mother before setting out for her first lesson from Mr. Dalton. In the shaft of sunshine that streamed across the breakfast-room, she made a pretty picture as she bent over the drawing board with her eyes agleam and her cheeks deepening to rose-color, bright golden lights playing on her soft brown hair.

Mrs. Hare looked at the drawing critically, in spite of the love so plainly shown in her face. She was determined to be strictly impartial as to Hilda's work,—to place herself in the position of a purchasing stranger, if possible. The little sketch of a small private sitting-room done in blue and white chintzes was evidently modeled on Hilda's former bedroom suite at Uplands,—the color being changed from pink to blue.

“It looks very well to me, my dear,” she replied,

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glad to be truthful and kind at the same time, “That arrangement of the couch and desk is an improvement on ours. It appeals to me very strongly, but I suppose I shouldn’t dare to use it without a permit from you, now that you’re to be a business person.”

The little joke had a delightful savor. Hilda laughed with pleasure and packed up her drawing to show her instructor. She felt that her day,—her important new day,—was well begun. Her mother’s verdict meant much to her. Since she had come home, only two days ago, she had begun to see her mother in a new light. Formerly she had felt pride in her mother’s cleverness, her gowns and her noted entertainments, but two days’ intimate companionship had shown her another side of that reserved nature,—a side which the stress of war had brought out and the after-war problems were showing in clearer relief each day.

After a gay farewell she glanced back at the graceful figure at the sewing-table with a sudden thrill of warm feeling. Mrs. Hare, in a white morning-dress with her dark hair piled high and a single yellow rose at her belt, was certainly an attractive picture as she stooped over the pile of woollen garments she was sorting for the Orphanage storehouse. The sunny garden outside of the long windows framed her vivid head with light and color,

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and the yellow-and-white chintzes of the cheerful room made a charming setting for her lithe beauty. Hilda wondered that she had never before really seen how lovely her mother was.

“She’s perfectly stunning and she looks almost as young as I do,” she thought proudly as she hurried to the garage. She was to have the car for the morning with the understanding that she drive for her mother in the afternoon. “I’ve been awfully blind not to see how wonderful she is. She seems more like a chum than a mother,—now that I’m really grown-up and going in for real things.”

A great desire to please this newly discovered mother came strongly upon her. She determined to do her very best,—not only with Mr. Dalton but also at Grey Cot, where she knew that many opportunities for service would be waiting one on the lookout for them.

The remembrance of her evening’s work came to float her rising spirits still higher. She had not only made the drawing but she had gone to the sewing-machine while her mother was occupied with a caller and had finished the entire lot of garments, working under happy pressure and ending before the caller had left. The burnt jam was paid for and her score was clear. Her mother’s offer of the car for her first day of business completed her satisfaction. Altogether she had made good use of her



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time since the decision of yesterday. “If I can just go on like this,” she thought, hopefully.

She felt she was beginning many new enterprises and she thought she was doing them very well. She brought the car to the curb in front of the quiet red-brick house with a swift precision that increased her satisfaction. It was easy to do things well when she was approving herself,—happiness gave her hand a surer touch, her eye a keener sight,—success made her succeed.

“I know I’ll have a perfectly fine morning,” she told herself as she mounted the steps and rang the bell.

Her prophecy proved to be quite true.

Mr. Dalton, in the big, sky-lit study at the back of the house, opened a mine of delight to her eager seeking. He showed her fabrics of various ages, explained weaves and textures with the precision of the connoisseur, noted the permanence of eastern dyes, and made her see, all in one little hour, the great difference between the modern clever imitation and the beautiful mysterious colorful charm of the antique tapestries and leather-work. Hilda found it all inexpressibly delightful, and she liked Mr. Dalton better every minute she spent with him.

“It’s wonderful how clearly you make me see things,” she told him as he folded a lovely blue-and-pink-and-yellow Damascus drapery. “You seem

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to have been everywhere and seen everything worth while, too. It certainly is very, very kind of you to bother with me, whom you didn't know the least scrap."

Mr. Dalton smiled and stroked his well-brushed beard. "The fact that I used to play jack-stones and bat-out-and-catch with Jean's mother when we were both youngsters may explain," he replied. "You need instruction of the right sort, and you need it instantly,—after the manner of young creatures. I knew you could manage, with proper coaching. Don't you think I would have been a callous brute to refuse? Most of my life has been spent acquiring knowledge. Surely it was time to give a bit of it out. I am very fond of Jean. You are Jean's friend and future partner,—one of the necessary units to the whole of Jean's happiness. That explains it clearly. You don't need to be grateful, you see."

Hilda hesitated. She knew the matter had been arranged by Mrs. MacAllister with her mother's consent, but she could not help a sense of encroaching on Mr. Dalton's time. She did not know then that he was really a very wealthy man, and that his simple household in Barford Street was only one of many possessions in many parts of the world. She saw only the simple household, and in spite of the priceless treasures within it she was inclined to

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be uneasy at the tax she was imposing on her teacher's time.

“I wish I might do something some time in return for your very great kindness,” she said, looking at him very seriously with her wide violet-grey eyes. “I don't know what it could be, but I'd love to show you how much I enjoy coming here. I've never spent such a morning in my life.”

He smiled at her across the shining perfection of the Sheraton table. “Wait till you've spent a month on these things,” he responded with a chuckle. “Gratitude does not always survive habit. When you are more used to these tapestries and rugs they may bore you. Young girls don't usually limit their delights to Persian patterns or Walloon weaves. I shan't blame you, mind, if you find all this tiresome in the end. It's not in nature to stick to finished fabrics while life is in the making.”

Hilda laughed with pleasure, realizing his sympathetic mind. She suddenly felt very much at home with him. She bent forward to emphasize her point. “Ah, but you forget that even a donkey will travel straight ahead when there's a bunch of hay hanging just before his nose,” she returned gaily. “That partnership is the bunch of hay in my case. If I should tire of these studies,—which I never, never shall—there's always the hay dangling just an inch before my nose to lure me on.”



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They parted in great friendliness, with the prospect of another lesson on the morrow, and Hilda went off in high spirits, convinced of her prophetic feeling of the morning. She took time to swerve for a moment at Watson's glove counter where she told Page Carter, between customers, of her new work. Page's blush of delight in her friendship was reward enough for the effort spent, and Hilda fell more under the spell of her charm than she had on the previous day. She was determined to make some definite effort to change the glove counter for something more worthy of Page. More than ever, as she drove homeward, did she regret her hasty promise of secrecy.

At luncheon she gave a full account of her hours with Mr. Dalton, an account which seemed to give her mother much pleasure, but she said nothing of her other hopes, recalling her pledge with more and more dissatisfaction. It was with elaborate carelessness that she urged her mother to help her in the selection of her bridesmaid's gloves for Betty Yarrow's wedding. "We can stop at Watson's on our way down-town," she suggested with great cunning. She felt herself very underhand, but knew it could only be by such means she might help Page Carter. Mrs. Hare's assent filled her with satisfaction.

After she had dressed she gaily took her way



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across the lawn to the garage. The breeze brought clouds of fragrance, and showers of rose-petals drifted on its warm breath. A brown thrasher poured out his flood of liquid melody from the thicket beyond the stable. She gave a little prance of sheer joy in life. Although she was past seventeen, she was very much a little girl at times.

“It’s perfectly jolly to be doing something real,” she told herself exuberantly. “Little things come first, of course, but the big things are just ahead,” she gave a chuckle of remembrance, “like the donkey’s hay. And there’s plenty of fun in the chase.”

An exultant sense of achievement stirred her. “Mother will be sure to notice Page,” she thought, as she ran the car out on the smooth drive toward the side door. “Something good is sure to come of it.”

But Mrs. Hare was absent and preoccupied, Page was doubly reserved and rather self-conscious and Hilda was so intent on playing a minor part that she overdid her restraint and hardly spoke a word.

After the gloves were bought and they had left the counter, she saw that she had not carried off the affair as she had hoped. It was too late, however, to mend matters and she was forced to follow her mother away with the scant consolation of a backward friendly glance at Page.

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"I made a perfect mess of that," she told herself, much vexed at her lack of tact. "I was right about being a donkey after all, I do believe."

Nevertheless, the afternoon, after this slight break, passed off very successfully. Mrs. Hare came out of the Orphanage with a brighter face and they drove about in growing enjoyment on many varied errands. Hilda was impressed with the dexterity and dispatch shown by her mother in handling each matter she turned her attention to, and she inwardly rejoiced in having such a capable ally in her new enterprise.

They drove home through the slanting shadows, and they found tea waiting for them under the shady linden trees amid the green freshness of the side lawn. Jean MacAllister was lounging in one of the comfortable lawn-chairs, busy with Hilda's knitting bag. She rose as they left the car and came across the velvety turf.

"Thought I'd put in a stitch or two for you while I waited," she explained quietly. "Martha said you'd be here by five. I've news of a sort."

Hilda flung herself on the tree-seat and took a sandwich from the tray. "News?" she echoed. "Nothing from Hal? Oh, of course not. You told me last night over the 'phone he was going to Warsaw. What in the world is it? Elizabeth isn't backing out, is she?"

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Jean grinned. “Take your time, my infant,” she drawled tolerantly. “Three guesses if you choose. I’m in no hurry.” She spoke with her eyes on Mrs. Hare who had halted to receive a telegram from John, had hastily read it and now joined them, smiling at the last words.

“Oh, but I am in a hurry, and I want to hear it, if it isn’t a secret,” she said, taking a tinkling glass from the tray and sipping it as she stood. “I hope it isn’t a lengthy story for I must run in at once. The telegraph office closes out here ridiculously early, you know.”

Hilda started. “You haven’t had news, too?” she asked anxiously. “Cousin Alice ——”

“Is getting on nicely but they want me to come very soon. The Porters are going as far as Cleveland in their private car and I am to wire them whether I will join them to-morrow night or wait till later to go on by myself,” explained her mother. “They seem bent on my going, so ——”

“You will go with the Porters, of course,” cried Hilda, forgetting her grievance against the plan, now that it was a settled fact. “You’ll be so much more comfortable that way.”

Mrs. Hare laughed at her eagerness. “You see, Jean, how business makes the heart callous,” she said. “Last night she was all against this project, but now after one morning spent among her



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precious materials, she gives me up without a murmur. It almost decides me to refuse to go."

"You'll not be the only one she'll have to do without, Mrs. Hare," announced Jean. "I'm off myself to-morrow. Mother finds the course can be condensed by taking it on the spot, so I'm moving out to Cornwells this very night,—bag and baggage. That's my news, infant."

The three looked at each other in astonishment. Hilda was the first to speak. "You always do the right thing, Jean; you'll cram and have it over in no time," she declared. "I'm going to pitch in and study so hard I'll be ready, too, when you come back. And I shan't have time to miss anyone,—not very much," she ended a little wistfully.

Mrs. Hare hesitated. "I had thought Jean might stop with you," she said, "but that is out of the question now. I shall have to think it over. You must not be left quite alone. . . ."

Hilda sprang up with an outstretched hand. "Oh, please don't bother about me," she cried. "I'll ask Miss Landis for the first week,—it'll do her good to be out of town in this weather, and she said to-day that her vacation is to begin Saturday. She'll come, I'm sure."

Mrs. Hare's face lighted. "The very thing," she agreed with relief. "I'll 'phone over to the library at once, and if she can come, I'll send my telegram."



## *“WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE”*

Good-bye, Jean, and good luck to the partnership,” and she shook hands warmly before she went to the house.

Jean looked after her with much admiration. “She certainly is a peach,” she said solemnly. “I’d cry for her, too, if I were sick in Detroit and hadn’t a mother of my own.” Then with another tone she asked, “How’d you like Mr. Dalton? Isn’t he a wizard?”

Hilda agreed that he was more than that and told her of her happy morning in the red-brick house. “I’m to go to-morrow,” she added. “It’s perfectly wonderful how much I’ve learned already. I believe I’ll be ready for the partnership whenever it comes.”

“That’s the talk, my child,” approved Jean as she rose. “Stick to those sentiments and keep your pennies in your paddy and we’ll make the rippingest firm in creation next fall. Now I’m off, for I’ve gobs to do before I fly. I’d ask you to run over with me but I know you haven’t time.”

She was gone with a wave of the hand and Hilda sat clinking the ice in her empty glass. Jean’s words about her accounts recalled her bills of yesterday. She had not entered them in her book yet, and she got up briskly, full of the vigor of good purposes.

“I’ll go fix that book right away,” she thought.

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

“ I’ll have to be very careful after this to put down every cent as I spend it. Jean mustn’t find me a penny out of the way when she comes home at the week-end.”

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HIGH STRAIGHT ROAD

“ I WISH I hadn’t promised Betty to go see her things the moment I got home,” she thought as she left Mr. Dalton’s the next day. “ When I wrote I didn’t dream about the partnership or Mother going away. Besides, I’m on a sort of probation and oughtn’t to spend time on mere fun,—that can come later.”

She sighed as she thought of Betty’s trousseau, which would probably take hours to examine properly. “ If I do go, I’ll cut it short, and I’ll make her promise not to breathe that I’m home. I don’t want any of the crowd to know. Jean didn’t tell anyone and Mother’s tea-party people won’t spread the news, I’m sure. It’s Mother’s last day at home, too. I really oughtn’t to go.”

She thought of her useful, happy morning, spent in study, and she actually grudged the time that it would take to get across town to view Betty Yarrow’s wedding preparations. Until now she had been thrilled by the thought of Betty, the feather-brained mouse of their nursery days, marry-

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

ing and having a great establishment and a real husband of her own.

At luncheon she voiced her feelings. "I believe I'll postpone running over to Betty's," she said with a rather serious air. "I'm not so keen on that sort of thing just now. It doesn't seem quite in line with my work and all that."

Mrs. Hare could not resist a crinkle of amusement, but her voice was very kind as she replied. "Don't you think it might appear ungracious if you delayed? Betty has been waiting, you know, and you'll have to explain your reason for not keeping your promise. Take the car and go directly we have finished lunch."

Hilda sighed. "Well, if I must, I must, I suppose," she agreed with resignation.

But she told herself rather sadly, when she was in the car again and speeding toward the big Georgian mansion on the other side of the wide city, that even her mother had moments of feminine weakness. The tea-party and her interest in Betty's entirely superfluous clothing proved that clearly. She loyally tried not to dwell on it, though it kept recurring all through her visit to her friend. She felt a bit traitorous herself because she found the eager welcome from dear little Betty and the array of beautiful things rather more to her mind than she had expected. The boxes heaped on one small





BETTY AND HER ARRAY OF THINGS WERE MORE TO HER  
THAN SHE HAD EXPECTED



## *THE HIGH STRAIGHT ROAD*

table alone were worth wasting an hour over. She had some difficulty in keeping within the bounds she had set for herself.

Nevertheless, she had Betty's promise of secrecy as to herself, and she had not inquired after the old crowd. When she was on the road again her new principles triumphed gloriously, and, home once more, she stopped on her way to her room to commiserate her old friend's state of mind.

"She's just wrapped up in Lawrence and her trousseau," she told her mother with a tinge of compassion. "And she isn't going to get over it for ages,—you know how she is,—what with the wedding and the three months' trip and all that. It's a pity that it all happens now when everyone ought to be doing real, unselfish work. The tips they'll spend would feed I don't know how many poor Armenians."

"Then you do not consider Betty doing right in marrying the man she has loved ever since she was a wee tot?" asked her mother, not looking up from her packing. "You think she is taking a useless selfish vacation?"

Hilda glowed with exalted devotion, but something in her mother's quiet manner made her hesitate and frown. "I don't know that I ought to say it," she replied uncertainly. "But it does seem to me that she is a sort of slacker to go off on a trip



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

just now. Think of how much good that money would do," she made a rapid mental calculation of the number of loaves of bread that might be bought from the tips alone. "A whole month of traveling might mean a lot to the poor Armenians at this time," she ended soberly.

Mrs. Hare looked keenly at her and then she laughed out, a merry ripple that quickly dismissed the subject. "Well, we must make allowances for laxity, even among ourselves." She rose as the chiming hall clock struck. "But it's time we were off, if we are to get my errands done and be back on time. I must see Martha for a moment and then I'll be with you."

Hilda, having gotten the idea, could not dismiss the matter so lightly, however, and it bothered her as they drove about on their errands. In the wretched household where the young woman was bravely supporting her small family by her own exertions; at the shop where a line of girls no older than Betty worked at hard coarse work, Hilda saw, or thought she saw, some very strong reasons why Betty and Lawrence should not waste money on mere wedding favors and trips.

And as they drove into the glittering shops and luxurious hotels of the more prosperous business section, the contrast between the two sides of life smote her more sharply. While she waited for her



## *THE HIGH STRAIGHT ROAD*

mother at the curb of an exclusive woman's club, she had some very hot thoughts on the subject.

"What a pity to spend so much on useless things!" she exclaimed warmly as they started for home. "I wonder why people will keep on doing it."

Mrs. Hare looked at her gravely. "Are they useless?" she asked quietly. "It is so hard to be sure, is it not?"

Hilda felt a pang of disappointment, almost disillusionment. She wondered if her mother really meant what she said. The rush of traffic, however, took all her mind and the lateness of the hour added its distraction. In the hurry to get home and to be dressed on time, she lost sight of her perplexity for the moment.

It came to her later, though, after she had welcomed the score or two of guests under the shady lindens and had done her best to aid her mother in the task of making a number of persons of widely differing tastes and positions spend an enjoyable hour together.

Mrs. Hare was a charming hostess and her cordial interest in each group was so genuine that Hilda wondered at it. She moved about with a smile and a gracious word and, wherever she went, she created an atmosphere of pleasant sociability. She saw that fat old Mrs. Giddings of Giddings'

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

Golden Globules had just the right amount of lime-juice in her tea, and she knew how Miss Todd of the Community House liked her toast spread. She saw that young Mr. Dalton of the Social League met the right people to be interested in his work, and she kept tired Miss Landis in the lounging chair by the tea-table until there was some color in her narrow face.

Hilda, hovering about, noted the energy bestowed on this, to her present mind, rather trivial performance. "After all, it's only afternoon tea," she told herself critically. "It's a waste. Surely, it is a waste."

She stood looking back at the pretty scene from the corner of the rose-garden where she waited for John with cakes. Yes, it certainly was a waste,—this chattering and eating under the linden trees on the pleasant lawn. "It's a wonder Mother can't see it," she thought, as he took the second plate and went toward the clustering chairs. "Why doesn't she see it?"

But it was plain her mother did not see it. Even when, after the people had gone, Hilda put the question, she did not seem to realize how Hilda felt about it. She was almost indifferent.

"My dear, you can't make the world over in a day," she replied, taking Hilda's arm and falling into step as they walked across the lawn. "We

## *THE HIGH STRAIGHT ROAD*

have to take it as we find it and try to turn it to our own purposes if we can. There does not seem to be any other way. You may not be able to force people to be good or generous, but sometimes you can coax them into it."

Hilda flashed a look at her, stopping dead in surprise. "Then it was to get that horrid Mrs. Ferkin to join the Nursery Association that you asked her here to-day?" she broke out. "I heard her promising Miss Landis she'd join at once. She'd never have done it except to be on the Board with you."

Mrs. Hare's smile died into a sweet gravity. "That part cannot hurt us, can it?" she interrupted. "The poor children will be benefited, though. And Miss Landis will be less anxious. She has had but few large checks of late. Mrs. Ferkin has promised to take up the work that Mrs. Jameson's death left on Miss Landis' shoulders. She is very rich, my dear."

"And as stingy as can be, too," Hilda could not help retorting. "But she's so crazy about being seen with the right people and having her name in the papers with them, that she'd give anything. She's perfectly horrid, I think. I hate snobs and toadies!"

"I am not very fond of them," replied Mrs. Hare calmly, "but they have their uses."



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

Hilda could say no more. Though she was rather ashamed of her outburst in contrast with her mother's kind and serene manner, she could not subscribe to such doctrine. She went up to her room with a little disappointed lump in her throat, and got out her books with a flush of self-righteousness upon her smooth cheeks.

"I'd rather never get a cent than to get it that way," she announced emphatically, as she opened the volume on Wall Decoration.

It was strange how many people were failing to come up to her new standard. Betty Yarrow in her selfish happiness, and even her own admired mother with that suspicious doctrine of using the foibles of the world to help the world to better conditions. It brought a puzzle into the delightful simplicity of her new life of devotion.

"I don't like it," she said emphatically as she settled down to her congenial task. "I wish they'd all stick to plain, honest, straightforward work. There's plenty of it, dear knows!"

A flitting memory of her mother in the tenements, in the factory and at the Nursery and Orphanage smote her uncomfortably. She ruffled the pages with a little sigh. Wall decoration did not lure her strongly at this moment. She laid down the book and went to her desk, getting out the two red books that held her jumbled accounts for the past six



## *THE HIGH STRAIGHT ROAD*

months. She meant to bring herself to the judgment bar, to be inexorable in order to make her future faultless.

All the useless indulged hours of her careless past cried out at her from those two little red books. The amounts she had wasted on trifles appalled her. She groaned over sums so lightly flung away. "I've wasted and wasted all my life," she lamented. "Oh, how could I have been so silly!"

At last she closed the books and stared out at the sunset sky where a pink cloud floated high above the tree-tops of the thicket. But she did not see the lavish color, she did not hear the lovely liquid call of the wood-thrush from the distant woods. Her mind was on real things,—tangible, marketable things like loaves and fishes.

"I'm going to make up for it," she said firmly, as she snapped the desk shut to hide the confusion within. "I shan't spend anything on myself, and I'll work with all my might. Mother will find when she comes back that I've made good."

She rose with a breath of satisfaction in the simplicity of her course. Whatever way others might choose, her path lay clear before her. It was a path of self-denial, of devotion, of absolute sincerity,—free from guile and constant to the end.

"It's all plain sailing for me now," she said triumphantly, and she ran down-stairs singing. Life

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

was very delightful, after all, even though it held disillusion and partings.

She found her mother in the library writing a list of commissions for her,—errands, messages and so on. There was a small pile of belated mail on the table and she seized on the three envelopes addressed to herself. She would fill in the moments until her mother was free. She dropped the first in her lap with a shrug,—it was an invitation for a supper party at the Country Club. The second, an invitation to a luncheon and on the same day, shared the same fate, but the third she read carefully. It was an appeal for a subscription for the starving Armenians.

Mrs. Hare looked up as she finished, and explained the duties she was leaving to Hilda. Then she glanced at the mail. “Anything interesting?” she asked.

Hilda shook her head. “Just a couple of parties that I shan’t go to,” she returned. “I’m not going to begin to play about with the old set just yet. It takes too much time. I’ll see them all at Betty’s wedding and that’ll be quite soon enough.”

“Who’s giving them?” her mother questioned.

“Mrs. Champion is giving the supper and the luncheon is at Marta’s. It seems silly to give parties for Bob Halket just because he’s home from college.

## *THE HIGH STRAIGHT ROAD*

They made enough fuss over him last year when he came from France to last a century."

"Perhaps he's going away," suggested Mrs. Hare absently. "It seems I heard something about some work he was thinking of taking up."

"Well, I'm not going to his party, anyway," laughed Hilda. "He can come over here if he wants my society."

"I thought you and Jean hadn't told anybody your plans," her mother reminded her. "No one knows you are home, I fancy. You see, the envelopes are marked, 'Please forward.'"

Hilda laughed again. She went over and knelt down by her mother's side. "All the better, my dear, to keep your little girl out of temptation while her lovely mother is away," she said, rubbing her soft cheek against her mother's hand. "I won't be apt to waste my allowance on nonsense if I steer clear of them all. It's the only safe and sane thing for me to do."

Mrs. Hare smiled down on her tenderly and touched the bright hair with a gentle hand. "It is well to know one's weakness," she agreed. "I believe I shall find you qualified for that partnership when I come back,—you've had your lesson in that burnt jam."

The words stuck in Hilda's mind. After she had kissed her mother good-bye in the luxurious private



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

car, after she had driven silently with a very silent John beside her all the long way home, after she had welcomed gentle little Miss Landis and made her at home in the pretty guest-room across the hall, the phrase repeated itself in her mind.

“Yes, I’ve had my lesson in that burnt jam,” she said, as she stood at her bedroom window looking out at the stars. “And I’m cured. I’ll stick to the safe and sane way and I simply won’t miss that partnership.”

As she turned from the radiant night a happy thought struck her. “I’ll get Page to come out here after Miss Landis goes,” she thought. “Mother said she wouldn’t be back for at least a fortnight. Page can’t possibly refuse when I’m here all alone.”

She chuckled at her own diplomacy. “Ah, Miss Page Carter, there’s more than one way of catching wild pigeons,” she said. “We’ll see how you take that bait, my dear.”

## CHAPTER V

### CLOUDS

“GONE to lunch.”

The girl with the side-bobs glanced indifferently at Hilda and went on showing white kid gloves to an amiable old lady in striped silk. A dozen boxes stood on the counter and the girl was getting out more. She barely noticed Hilda's second question, and it was only after she had deposited three more boxes on the counter that she found space for reply.

“Can't say, I'm sure. She lunches out,” she vouchsafed in her most bored manner, and then turning to the old lady, she spoke more vivaciously. “This is a *vurry* attractive style. That wide stitching's all the rage for dressy wear.”

Hilda stood irresolute. She had not had a word with Page since her mother's departure nearly a week ago. Her studies, the commissions for her mother, the hours devoted to helping little Miss Landis enjoy her vacation had claimed every minute of her time, until this morning.

She particularly wanted to see her new friend. Miss Landis had received in the morning mail a

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

most attractive invitation to Long Island and Hilda meant to induce Page Carter to see her duty as substitute. She decided not to be balked.

“ I’ll wait at the entrance on Clinton Street,” she thought, moving off slowly. “ She ought to be back soon. I can wait till one o’clock, if I rush afterward.”

She knew she deserved the satisfaction of seeing Page at this moment. Had she not played her part to the extent of her abilities? She looked back on the cheerful effort of the last few days and the busy hours after she had gone to her room,—hours when she had written long, explicit letters to her mother in reply to the two cheerful telegrams from Detroit, when she had made careful notes on the morning’s lesson, or virtuously put her stocking-bag in order. She felt she deserved her reward in Page’s prompt acceptance of her proposed invitation.

But though she waited most patiently by the Clinton Street entrance, no Page Carter appeared among the noontime throngs. Three, four, five minutes went by. The clock in the church tower across the square struck out the hour sonorously. She knew that she could wait no longer, and with an exclamation of annoyance, she gave up and started the car toward home.

As she drove off through the thronging vehicles to the open roads and shady lanes that led to Grey



## CLOUDS

Cot, the fresh air and rapid motion robbed her disappointment of its first sting. Nevertheless, enough remained to make the prospect of the afternoon's duties,—the last commissions left by her mother for to-day,—far from pleasing.

“I wish Miss Landis weren't going right after lunch. She wanted to help me with those curtains for the Girls' Club,” she thought. “Now I'll have to do it alone. I wonder where the Ardsmore is, and what sort of a person this Mrs. Bradford who is giving the curtains will turn out to be? Some stout person who wants to uplift the dear girls,” she ended, rather sarcastically.

Ordinarily she would have enjoyed the work, but she was tired and out of sorts for some unknown reason. Perhaps she had been stretching upward too hard toward her new ideal of helpfulness and was suffering from a spiritual kink in the neck. At all events, she was far from her usual sunny self, and the effort she made to hide the fact from Miss Landis only made her the more dismal after that little lady had gone.

“I believe I'll break my vow long enough for a few minutes with Alice Clark,” she thought as she drove away from the station. “She may come over for to-night, and then I'll have time to prepare Page. She'd have to know the day before, I suppose.”

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

She wished that Jean were home. She felt it almost a personal matter that her chum had not returned for the week-end as expected, but had gone with a new acquaintance to see some famous garden at the other end of the state. She looked at the address on the slip with actual repugnance. "Mrs. Bradford, The Ardsmore," she read, and a picture of an elderly stout enthusiastic lady who was interested in the uplift of the girls at the club, again rose before her.

"I'll go ask Alice first," she decided and turned the blue foursome toward the old neighborhood.

She found Alice in her little sitting-room, which Hilda saw with new eyes,—the eyes of the interior decorator, and instantly decided her time was not lost. The warm greeting cheered her and, without waiting for an account of Alice's doings or inquiring about her other old friends, she plunged into a recital of her new absorbing work.

"I wish you were doing some real work, Alice," she ended enthusiastically. "You'll never know what you're missing. There is nothing in the world like feeling that one is part of the new life-tide of the reconstructing forces of the world." She felt she was going too far in quotation but she would not show her feeling.

Alice laughed and shook her head. "No, thank you, I can't take on anything more just now," she

## CLOUDS

replied. "Mother threatens to send me to a Rest Cure if I go into anything else. Why didn't you come to the luncheon yesterday, even if you did cut the supper?"

Hilda tried to hide her indifference to the trivial joys of social life. "I was busy, really," she returned. "I hadn't a minute of time."

"Well, you missed it," Alice told her cheerfully. "We had a wonderful time. Marta had only asked the old crowd from Miss Wilkinson's, and these farewells are always so exciting ——"

"Farewells?" broke in Hilda. "Who's going away? My note didn't say anything about farewells."

Alice looked astonished. "You don't mean to tell me that you don't know that Mary Elliot is going over to nurse for her uncle?" she exclaimed. "Why, everyone knows she's been taking the course right along with her other studies. Dr. Siddons says she's as clever at it as at her other college work. They left this morning."

Hilda felt a slight shock of disappointment under the flare of ready admiration that the news brought her. "I'm awfully sorry to have missed it," she said with keen regret. "I've seen nobody since I came home,—I suppose Jean and Betty thought I knew,—and since Mother went away on Thursday I've hardly spoken to a soul except on business."



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

I wish I had known. I'd surely have been there."

A sharp stab at the contrast between her own easy, pleasant work and the hard task of nursing in Dr. Elliot's Hospital in the Carpathian Mountains, a hospital financed by Mary's uncle and his friends, and which was one of the remaining benefits to stricken humanity from the late war, smote Hilda into silence. But a disturbing thought made her pause as she rose to go.

"Bob Halket's on the tennis team as usual, I suppose?" she asked casually.

"Bob Halket?" echoed Alice in intense surprise. "Bob? Oh, you simply must have heard ——"

"I haven't heard a single thing about the old crowd since I came back," interrupted Hilda.

"What's Bob going to do? He's too young ——"

"He's twenty-three," retorted Alice warmly. "He isn't a bit too young. He's going on the same ship and the same unit as Dr. Elliot. He and Bert Halliwell are both going to spend their vacation with Dr. Elliot. Mrs. Halliwell gave an outfit for a new room,—a whole ward—in the hospital, and the Halkets have fitted up a small dispensary in the next village. Bob's only first year medical but he's a good worker, for all that."

Hilda gasped. Here was news indeed! Her pride in her old chum leaped up generously and then

## CLOUDS

came a flash of wounded affection. Bob had left and sent her no word. Bob had not even thought of her, it seemed.

“He might have let on that he was going,” she said with a clouded face. “I don’t see why everybody was so terribly secret about it. Marta never hinted it was a farewell party. It’s strange nobody told me. They might have known I’d want to see Bob—and Mary—before they left.”

Alice was rather sharp. “Oh, as to that, you can’t complain,” she replied. “You haven’t written to a soul for ages. You went off after Commencement with those new friends of yours and you haven’t chirped a note since you came home. These are other days from the old ones, my dear. You’ve got to let people know you’re alive if you don’t want to be considered a dead one.”

Hilda’s wounded feelings gave way to common sense. “I suppose it was my fault this time—partly,” she confessed. “I’ve been wrapped up in other things, and since Mother went out to Cousin Alice’s—she’s quite ill as I said,—I’ve had more than ever to think of.” At the door, however, her sense of injury overwhelmed her again. “Someone might have told me, nevertheless,” she added crisply. “All of you knew they were going. All of you had the chance to say good-bye. Someone might have remembered me.”

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

Alice flushed. "That's perfect nonsense," she said. "Mrs. Champion asked you to Bob's supper. Marta asked you to the luncheon. If the invitations didn't reach you, it's not our fault. We weren't even sure you were home till Betty told us at the luncheon. If you will make a hermit of yourself you shouldn't blame other people for what you miss."

Hilda's temper responded swiftly to the impatience in Alice's tone, and, although she did not carry on the argument, she did not ask Alice to spend the night with her; she promptly said good-bye with a very stiff air. She went out of the entrance-hall with her head held high. She had expected better things of Alice Clark. She started the little foursome with an amateurish jerk that did not add to her content.

"Alice is not what she used to be, that's plain," she told herself bitterly as she drove off. "I shan't bother her again soon,—she's too disappointing."

She glanced about her at the spacious luxurious houses with their spreading lawns and wide terraces, the correct servants at the back regions of these great houses, the stream of well-appointed motors on the freshly sprinkled roadway, the well-groomed people on the streets. She had grown up among these surroundings and the park and chimneys of Uplands showed over the nearest hill. All were



## CLOUDS

very familiar, but now all seemed part of a past existence. Alice's news had shut her off in a place by herself. She felt decidedly more out of sorts as she drove through the warm sunshine.

"They might have told me," she repeated again and again.

She was really very tired, and self-pity is an easy emotion when one is tired. She felt that she had been decidedly neglected. The flavor had gone from life. She wished with all her heart that her mother were home. "It's just like the perversity of things that poor Cousin Alice should be taken ill at this time, when Mother has so many things to attend to and I am busy with my new work," she thought dismally. "Cousin Alice never sees any of us when she is well, and I don't see why she needs Mother now,—she must have stacks of people who are about her every day."

She drove slowly over the smooth roadway, trying to find some pleasant harbor for her disturbed mind. It was remarkable how lonely life had seemed since her mother had left. Everything failed to give her comfort just now. Even her generous check to the Armenians seemed only a hole in her allowance. She determined to try again at the glove counter.

Here again she met with failure. It was partly of her own making, but that did not help to soothe her. Page was busy with two customers who were

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

bent on getting everything the counter could offer, Hilda told herself. She waited for ten minutes and then with a brief nod to the disappointed Page went back to the car and slammed on the power, regardless of traffic regulations.

“ I’ll get those curtains and have them up and be done with it,” she thought. “ It’s the last thing I’ll do for anybody this week. I’m sick of them all.”

As she drove along the smell of the warm asphalt and the clang of the trolley gongs jarred on her, and the sight of the Saturday shopping crowds,—the hurried school children and the warm, tired mothers,—made her sigh again.

She slowed the car as she entered the street and looked for the Ardsmore. It turned out to be a trim, grey-stone apartment house with striped awnings and gay window-boxes. Somehow its fresh, correct appearance did not please her.

“ She’s sure to be tiresome but I won’t stop,” she determined. “ These charitable ladies talk too much. I shan’t stop a single minute.”

She got out and went up the low, wide steps to the open cool vestibule.

## CHAPTER VI

### ENTER MRS. BRADFORD

THE moment that Hilda saw the light supple figure in pale grey coming out of the little elevator in the entrance-hall, she felt her dark mood slip from her. Somehow she knew it was Mrs. Bradford and she hardly waited for the clerk at the desk to confirm her.

“ I have a message from Mrs. Hare,” she began, going eagerly forward. “ She is unable to meet you as she had planned. . . .”

She did not need to choose her words, for Mrs. Bradford turned on her the friendliest eyes imaginable and smiled enchantingly. Hilda felt such a warm rush of admiration that all her previous fatigue and foreboding vanished and she smiled back vividly. The mere sight of the donor of the curtains for the Girls’ Club was refreshing,—she was so very different from what she had expected.

“ You are very good to come in your mother’s place,” replied Mrs. Bradford in a beautiful voice. “ I am sorry that such a serious matter has called her away. Will you come up and see the things?



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

I was just on my way to the stores for some more material,—I find I have miscalculated. But you may take what I have and I can send the rest directly to the club.”

Hilda followed her to the elevator, and she simply could not help looking at her with eyes that told how much she admired this unexpected person. She was well worth looking at and in spite of her modest, almost demure, air, it is possible that she knew it. She was of medium height, with dark soft hair, straight dark brows above a pair of long brown eyes that could flash into sudden brilliance when she smiled. She had slender flexible fingers which were quite as noticeable for their beauty as were her eyes or her long graceful throat. She wore a simple exquisite dress of palest grey with a hint of violet at the girdle and a grey hat and long loose veil. Altogether she was so charming that Hilda could not hide her delight in her.

Mrs. Bradford, in her turn, looked at Hilda with evident satisfaction. If her first glance had been swift and searching it mellowed into such an approving look that Hilda felt soothed and flattered.

The rooms were in accord with Mrs. Bradford and Hilda wished to prolong the interview. When the curtains had been shown and the deficiency explained she made her eager offer.

## *ENTER MRS. BRADFORD*

“Let me take you down for the rest of it,” she said. “I haven’t anything to do until the curtains are ready.”

Mrs. Bradford accepted with an easy grace. She seemed very ready to be friendly. And when the needed material was bought, she insisted on going down to the club and helping put the curtains up, turning the duty into a real pleasure, and charming the few girls who were in the rooms quite as thoroughly as she had charmed Hilda. Altogether, she proved just what she had seemed,—an ideal companion. After gentle Miss Landis’ mild chatter, her bright interest and clever speeches seemed doubly sparkling to Hilda.

It was wonderful how easily Hilda talked to her, pouring out all her hopes and plans, in response to her sympathetic questions. Mrs. Bradford, too, was talkative, though she did not deal in details. She gave Hilda to understand that she had just come up from Washington on some important business connected with the Community Welfare work, that she had been a widow for three years, and that she was deeply interested in the charitable and philanthropic end of the welfare work. Hilda could see that she was earnest and sincere, and was much impressed by the mention of her new acquaintance’s many activities.

“I have so many meetings and committees that

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

I hardly know how to manage to get about to them," she confessed as they turned homeward after a lively farewell to the group of girls on the doorstep of the club. "Actually there are not enough hours in the day for me. I spend half my time on the street cars or in taxis."

Here was an opening which Hilda grabbed at. "Let me take you once in a while," she urged. "I have most of my afternoons now and I'd love to help."

Mrs. Bradford appeared to hesitate. "If you really had," she began, and checked herself with a gesture of regret. "I should not think of imposing on you," she ended in a tone that somehow left the impression that she had meant to make some proposal.

Hilda was alight with pretty eagerness. "Indeed, I should love to do whatever you'd let me," she protested. "Please let me take you about while you are in town." As Mrs. Bradford showed no signs of relenting, she insisted, "Mother is away, as I told you, and I am really rather dull without her."

Mrs. Bradford rippled charmingly. "So you mean to take me in place of your mother," she said merrily. "Ah, that puts another face on the matter! I cannot refuse that plea. I must adopt you until she returns, I suppose, or be haunted in my



## *ENTER MRS. BRADFORD*

dreams by the memory of the lonely orphan. Well, so be it. I submit."

It was arranged that Hilda should call for her the next morning at eleven to take her to some distant district where she was to address two separate meetings of the Women's Party League. They shook hands very cordially upon it and Hilda went home in good spirits. She decided not to stop for Page Carter as she had intended, but to send a note over to the small house by a messenger, asking her to be ready in the morning about twelve when she would call for her in the car. It seemed a good arrangement, as it gave her the morning for Mrs. Bradford and good works.

"She's the sweetest person I ever met," she thought ardently, as she dressed for her solitary dinner. "I am positive she would never neglect a friend."

She had her dinner in the summer-house and ate it with relish as the sunset flamed behind the tree-tops of the woods beyond the barns. Everything had zest for her now. She did not feel lonely. She forgot Alice Clark's snippiness. Page's absence was easily borne. A letter from her mother added to her satisfaction.

Mrs. Hare wrote a favorable account of the state of Mrs. Whildin, whose condition was rapidly improving; she gave a graphic picture of her daily

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

routine in the sick-room and on the estate; she sent some directions as to her own committees and other public duties; and she ended by saying that a visitor would arrive at Grey Cot in the early part of the week.

“Jack is a dear boy and you will like him immensely,” she wrote. “He is Cousin Alice’s nephew on the other side. He is only fifteen, though he is so tall he looks older. He is really quite fine at heart, and I know he will be a pleasant companion to you while I have to be away. He may stop with us a month or so. Tell Martha——”

Hilda laid down the letter with a smile. “That’s just like Mother,” she thought. “He’s probably a terror. Mother always sees angels where others see only imps,—like those young monkeys at the Orphanage. I suppose this Jack has completely fooled her.” She sat smiling absently up at the pink-and-violet sky, recalling her mother’s devotion to the seemingly hopeless cases in the Orphanage. “She believes in them. And she certainly can do more with them than anyone else. Those little demons will behave beautifully for her though they set the matrons wild.”

When she broke the news she saw at once that Martha evidently had no theories about fifteen-year-olds of the masculine sort,—that is, no theories that gave her satisfaction. She appeared to look on the

## *ENTER MRS. BRADFORD*

visitation as a calamity. She said nothing, but her back as she went to her duties spoke volumes. Hilda looked after her with sympathetic eyes.

“Good old Martha, she’s worrying already,” she thought kindly. “She doesn’t realize that is just the way to make trouble. I’ll have to be extra nice to him, I suppose, to make up for it. I believe I will try Mother’s plan. I’ll pretend he’s an angel, —he must be a terror if Mother has to apologize for him.”

Her mind was in a flutter of benevolence as she went indoors and she was so intent on her thoughts that she did not see John at the side-porch. He held a small note in his hand, and his face was slightly perturbed. He had an apologetic manner.

“I found this on the gate-box, Miss Hilda,” he explained. “I think somebody must a-left it when we was all busy. Martha had to go to the store, and I was a-cleaning those blackberry bushes ——”

Hilda broke in on his explanation as she saw the writing on the note. “It’s all right, John, I’m sure,” she replied hastily, and she ran into the house with a flutter of pleasure at her heart. It was Mary Elliot’s writing.

“They didn’t forget me, after all,” she said joyfully, and she tore open the note and read eagerly, her cheeks flushing and her eyes shining.



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

“Dear Hilda,” Mary’s side of the sheet said, “I didn’t want to go without saying good-bye. We have only a moment, as we’re on our way now, and Bob insisted that we come around by your house. Nobody is home so we’ll leave our good-bye on the gate-post. Write. Yours as ever, Mary.”

On the opposite sheet Bob had scrawled: “So long, old girl, we’ll see you later. Tried to get you on the ’phone after I heard on Friday that you were home, but couldn’t make it. Be a good child, Hilda, and write. Mother has the address. Your pal, Bob.”

It was the finishing touch to her happy afternoon. She was almost glad that she had missed the note earlier in the day, since its coming at the twilight hour was so pleasant an ending to her varied day. She decided not to send the note to Page but to stop on her way out the next morning. Her promise not to let anyone know of Page’s existence was to be kept absolutely. She went singing up to her room, and after writing a short reply to her mother’s letter, she took up a new book and soon lost herself in its interesting pages. The house was very still when she finally laid it down and listened for the chimes of the hall clock.

“Half-past twelve!” she exclaimed in surprise. “I had no idea it was so late. The time has fairly raced to-night.”

## *ENTER MRS. BRADFORD*

She awoke to a brilliant new day, with the wind blowing a freshening gale and the sky blue and crisp as any October sky. It was one of those lapses that remind one of the frosts and snows of other seasons. She sprang out of bed with all her blood dancing. The roses were flinging their fading petals across the sunny emerald of the lawn and bird songs flooded the clear air. The distant hills were very blue against the crisp horizon.

Everything went well with her again. When she came out to the drive she found that John had washed the car and its fresh blue-and-cream harmonized well with the shining morning. She gave John one of the dollars from her inner pocket and drove off in high good spirits.

The only disappointment was again in regard to Page. She had gone out for the day, Hilda was told by a thin, worried-looking woman who answered her ring. She did not expect to be back before evening and she had not said where she was going. Hilda consoled herself with the hope that she might find her home again before it would be too late to persuade her to come to Grey Cot. "Perhaps she'll be in before dinner after all," she thought hopefully. "I'll run over and see, anyway. Things often turn out differently than you expect."

Mrs. Bradford in clinging black was quite as

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

charming as she had been yesterday in gray, and Hilda felt a thrill of pride in being the chosen escort of this lovely woman. At the hall where the first brief speech was made she found reason for her admiration. The speech was clear and rational and its effect on the audience was most gratifying. She heartily approved of the way the women crowded about the speaker with congratulations and invitations for the future. It was plain that Hilda was not alone in her feeling for the gifted Mrs. Bradford.

She insisted that they have luncheon together in a near-by inn and after that they drove to the second meeting. Mrs. Bradford laughingly said Hilda would not miss the regular church service since she was hearing so many sermons from her. It was on the way home that Hilda spoke of something she had not expected to mention, but the success of Mrs. Bradford's meeting had stirred her to a desire to offer some rarer bit of information than her own hopes and plans.

"Mr. Dalton has such wonderful tapestries in his house," she said, as she swung the car toward the Ardsmore. "I believe he would be glad to let you see them, if you care to. You seem to know so much about,—well, everything, that I thought you'd like them. He only shows them to a few friends, or people who understand tapestries."



## *ENTER MRS. BRADFORD*

Mrs. Bradford's reply paused for the tiniest fraction of a second. "I'd love it," she said simply. "I've seen some fine tapestries and you may be sure the courtesy would not be wasted. In the meanwhile, I want to ask you something very important."

Hilda slowed to attention and looked at her eagerly. She could not guess what was coming.

"I'm going to take an apartment out in Hampton Community Row," Mrs. Bradford went on. "It's the only way to see whether they are really as practical and comfortable as is claimed. So many of these places look all right, but are hopeless to live in. I shall make my experiment in good faith, and if I prove that the Hampton is a model apartment for working people, I shall have gained a triumph for our Committee. Will you help me?"

Hilda was confused by the unexpectedness of the request. "I'd love to," she stammered. "What—how can I help?"

"By taking me over there to-morrow to look the place over," replied Mrs. Bradford quickly. "After we have seen it, I'll tell you more. It's a bargain that we go to-morrow, is it?"

"Indeed it is!" cried Hilda delighted. "I'll come any time after two. My lesson takes the morning, you know. Will that suit?"

"Perfectly," responded Mrs. Bradford, as the

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

car slowed to stop before the Ardsmore. "At two-thirty, then. Good-bye, and many thanks. I shall have to report your helpfulness to the Committee, my dear."

Hilda drove off in happy anticipation. "I wonder what she will ask me to do?" she thought. "It will be something pleasant, I am sure."

She swerved to Page's suburb on the way home but the woman, now rocking on the shabby porch, shook her head before she put the question and she had to drive off again alone. But she was far from lonely. Memories of her delightful day brought a smile to her lips as she turned in the familiar drive to Grey Cot.

John met her at the entrance to the garage but his face did not reflect her smile.

"He's in the library, Miss Hilda," he announced, soberly.

Hilda gave a pleased start. "Who's in the library, John?" she asked, wondering which of the boys it might be. She hoped it might be Jim Yarrow.

"The young gentleman from the west, Miss Hilda,—Mr. Jack Hastings," replied the worthy John in the same monotonous tone. "He's been walking about and now he's gone to write letters, I believe."

## CHAPTER VII

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

HILDA went toward the library with her mind in a tumult. John's face had not been reassuring.

"He's probably worse than I expected," she thought swiftly. "But I must behave as though I adored him on sight,—that will bring him down a bit."

She stepped into the room with a bright, welcoming smile and stretched out a hospitable hand to the tall boy who was rising quickly from the desk-chair.

"It's awfully nice you could get here so soon," she said in her friendliest voice. "Mother wrote, of course, but I didn't know just when you'd arrive."

He bowed quite ceremoniously and held out a rather grimy hand. "I hope you will excuse my gloves," he said gravely. "I didn't stop to wash at the station."

He was so different from her fancied picture of him that for a moment she had no word and could only shake hands with him, in spite of the grime. He was about her own height and had the same



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

tipped-up nose but there the likeness ended; for he was dark and sedate in movement; his queer light eyes looked into her own violet-grey ones with a serious level gaze: his voice was low and slow,—altogether he was the complete reverse of her imaginary portrait. Yet she could not give up her impression of his real character.

“Didn’t John show you to your room?” she asked, recovering almost instantly. “How forlorn, when you must be aching to wash off the dust. Come along and I’ll show you where you are to bunk.”

The heartiness of his grip pleased her. She liked people who shook hands like that. She liked, too, the friendly seriousness of his queer light eyes. She could quite understand how her mother could have fallen under the spell of his charm. She had to brace herself not to make the same mistake.

After she had left him in the pretty airy room on the third floor with its three windows opening on the lovely summer world of garden and hillside, she went down-stairs smiling. She meant to try to find out what John’s gloomy expression meant.

It was Martha who enlightened her rather unconsciously, it seemed. For, in answer to Hilda’s questions as to when the guest had arrived and why he had not been shown at once to his room, Martha replied curtly: “Indeed, and John did wish to

## *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*

show him up-stairs, but the young gentleman preferred to wait until you came back. He said he had rather meet his hostess first,—she mightn't take to him kindly, in which case, he said, he wouldn't trouble us. He asked John to show him the nearest pond and he's been over to that pool of Mullen's ever since he came at three o'clock. 'Tisn't any fault of John's that he wasn't made quite comfortable here, Miss Hilda, for John's done his best for him,—that he has."

Hilda was somewhat concerned at Martha's foreboding air. It was plain that her new cousin had not managed to impress Martha in his favor, in spite of his winning manner. Her secret convictions as to his real character returned with force, but she felt she was quite equal to dealing with a mere boy. She met Jack in the dining-room with a steady smile.

"I hear you have been exploring," she said as they seated themselves at the table. "Did you find what you wanted at Mullen's?"

He flashed a surprised look at her that added to her satisfaction. "How did you know what I was after?" he countered.

Of course, she did not know but she saw that she had produced an effect and went on gaily. "You had a couple of hours there, didn't you? You must have made good use of your time."

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

He was silent as John handed the plates but after he had gone out he spoke earnestly, looking at Hilda with his level gaze. "I don't exactly know what you mean, Cousin Hilda," he said soberly. "I just went over there to pass the time. Those snakes I got were harmless and they're not near the house, anyway,—they're in the furthest stable in an old tin can. I only brought them along in case I had to go on to Williams' to-morrow,—I was to move on if we didn't hit it off, you know. Of course, if you don't want me to keep them, I'll let them out ——"

He was on his feet before Hilda could protest. He came back to the table with a rather crestfallen air, though he agreed readily enough that another time would do as well for attending to the captives. "Bert Fisher wrote me he'd got a dandy assortment of harmless snakes and I thought I'd start one of my own," he remarked as he took up his fork. "I didn't intend to bother anyone, though."

He was very quiet for the rest of the meal, and Hilda hardly knew whether he was secretly resenting her start of dismay at the mention of the snakes, or whether he was merely planning some excuse to move on to the more congenial Williams', whose tastes in reptiles were so greatly to his liking. After the dessert had been disposed of, he looked over at her with a relieved expression.



## *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*

"Well, I got through all right, didn't I?" he asked seriously.

"Through what?" asked Hilda, wondering whether he meant the frozen pudding or the two slices of cake with which the serious John had served him.

"The food test," he replied gravely. "I don't think I made a break but perhaps you noticed something that got past me. Did you?"

Hilda could not help laughing at his concerned face. She could hardly believe him in earnest. "You behaved like an ordinary Christian at table, if that is what you mean," she replied lightly. "You didn't swallow your knife or inhale the soup. Why do you ask?"

He looked at her oddly. "Aunt Alice says that a fellow can be spotted by the way he feeds, and I didn't want you to think she hadn't brought me up properly," he returned. "Aunt Alice is all right, you know."

"You haven't disgraced her so far," said Hilda, trying not to weaken in her judgment of him. This loyalty to the absent was very winning, and she threw a stronger emphasis on the last two words than she might have otherwise. Then, to make up for her implied distrust, she nodded brightly at him over the rose-bowl of the centerpiece and added, "Shall we go into the garden? I've some

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

of those Bible puzzles out there in the summer-house that may be new to you. And it will be light for an hour yet."

He rose as she did, but as he followed her toward the door, he halted suddenly. "I guess I'd better go see about those snakes," he said. "That John of yours wasn't sure that the cook would like me having them on the place. I'll have to attend to it, and then I'll be with you."

Hilda paused to watch his slim figure speeding across the lawn toward the stables. John, who had come in to remove the dessert plates, looked after him also. His face was stern and forbidding. He hurriedly put the last plate on the tray. "I'd better be off to see that no harm's done," he said grimly, as he went out.

Hilda laughed to herself as she, too, went out of doors. She took her way to the summer-house, thinking of John's grim manner. "He won't fool John so easily as he did Mother," she thought. "John is made of stiffer stuff. A few soft words won't win him over."

She felt so sure of John's opinion that she could hardly believe her eyes when, about fifteen minutes later, she saw the two come out of the second stable, one carrying a tin bucket and the other a small roll of wire-netting and both talking earnestly together, like the best of friends in the world.

## *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*

They halted at the kitchen door, and Martha's solid form appeared in the frame of the threshold. Her face wore a rather forbidding look and she spoke with emphasis. Jack answered, explaining and exhibiting the contents of the bucket, while John stood looking approval. In a minute or so Martha's expression changed. She nodded and disappeared, returning in a second with something that she gave to Jack, with a nod and a smile; and then she stood watching with interest the two as they went back to the stable again.

"He's fooled them both already," thought Hilda, wondering greatly. "He certainly knows how to make people do as he pleases. I suppose it will be my turn next," she added with a look that showed how far that time would be.

Jack came, whistling softly. His face shone with satisfaction. "We've got 'em fixed," he announced casually. "John got some fine screening and Martha gave me some meat-scraps and we put them in the old tin tub. They'll be safe and sound now. What's the name of that Land of Canaan puzzle you're doing? I bet I've seen it before. These others are new ones, though. Do you mind if I take the other side of the table?"

Hilda stuck to her program. She was more than friendly, and the hour passed quickly. When twilight dropped softly from the darkening skies



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

and the small sections of the puzzles could no longer be seen, they talked. Jack expanded wonderfully in the dim witchery of the dying sunset and the faint young moonlight. He told of his life in the middle-western town with his easy-going Aunt Alice, and of the schools and camps he had known. His warm admiration for his newly introduced relative from Grey Cot was very sincere.

"Aunt Cynthia has them all skinned a mile—except Aunt Alice, who's very different, you know," he amended loyally. "Aunt Cynthia's got plenty of grit and she's a regular picture to look at. That's the kind I'm going to marry, when I get around to that sort of thing. She's lots of fun to be with, and yet you can't bluff her off like some women. She sees right through you."

Hilda smiled in the darkness. She thought, "Oh, does she indeed? I don't know about that, Master Jacky." Aloud she said in as serious a voice as possible, "Perhaps you won't be able to find anyone just like her then. Don't count too much on it, or you mightn't care about marrying when you come to the proper age."

He wagged his head very positively. "I shall marry when I'm nineteen and I'm going to have a good big family," he announced firmly. "I'll pitch into those boys when they're up to their tricks, too. Believe me, they shan't fool me a little bit.

## *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*

I'll see that they get what's coming to them. I'll whack them every night on principle, like old Mr. Brown used to do to Uncle Ned."

"How about the girls?" asked Hilda with a ripple. "Shall you treat them to the same medicine?"

"Oh, no indeed," he replied magnanimously. "Girls are pretty good, you know. They giggle and are silly, but they're not like boys. My girls will have a dandy time. But the boys,—well, I know 'em,—that's all. And I'll see that they get what's coming to them."

Hilda was about to reply when a horn honked insistently just outside the garden palings and the glare of electric lamps swept across the shrubberies. A voice that Hilda knew well called cheerfully:

"Anybody at home in there in the dug-out?"

Hilda sprang up eagerly, calling out a gay reply. She motioned to Jack. "Come along. It's Janey Sloan and her cousin Leslie Masters,—he's lots of fun and she's just the sort you'll like," she explained hastily as they went toward the drive. At the same moment she was thinking that she would get Leslie to take charge of Jack for the tennis matches at the club. She knew she could trust Leslie to see that her cousin walked the straight and narrow path which she suspected he was in the habit of roaming from at any good opportunity.

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

Leslie brought the car to a halt just inside the gate and Janey leaned eagerly forward as Hilda, followed by Jack, came up. She was wrapped in a light cloak and her bright hair was blowing out in little curls all about her forehead. Her pink lips were parted in a very winning smile and she held out a slim hand of greeting.

“What possessed you to hide away like this?” she exclaimed. “We never knew you were within reach till Friday night at the supper, and we’ve been trying to get over every single minute since. I really didn’t quite know where you people had moved, either. I had to ’phone over to Uplands to that toplofty Mrs. Gryce to find your exact address. It’s awfully good to see you again.”

Her tumbling words were a matter of course to Hilda,—everyone who knew Janey knew that she bubbled incessantly; but Jack appeared to regard her as a sort of miracle. He scrutinized her gravely, hardly taking his eyes off her the whole time the pair stayed,—which was not long,—and though he responded politely to Leslie’s few sentences about the tennis courts at the club, he seemed more than content to subside into the background while the others kept up a lively fire of questions and answers relating to all that Hilda had missed since her vacation began.

Leslie had an invitation for Hilda for the



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monthly dance, in which he included Jack with heroic resignation. "I've got a fellow from Camp Dix for Janey," he said with a laugh. "He'll have leave for that day and we're going to sport him and his uniform around quite a bit. You'll have to cut your other engagements, Hilda, and help me chaperone Janey and him." Remembering Jack, he added hastily, "And your cousin, of course."

"Mother's going to have all the crowd out for the Field Day, and you're both to come, and we'll have luncheon served right in the machines,—Baxters serve the sweetest luncheons now on the field,—and we're to go on to Aunt Hannah Morton's for supper," babbled Janey, hanging over the door and beaming on Jack and Hilda impartially. "Don't say you've anything else for that day, for you simply can't have,—I asked everybody and they all said they hadn't seen or talked with you yet. So we're first, and we won't let you off."

As an afterthought she flung an extra smile at the serious Jack. "I've got just the girl you'd like, Mr. Hastings, so you positively can't refuse."

Hilda laughed at the assumption of Jack's mature age, but she did not enlighten the dimpling Janey. If Jack, in the faint moon-and-lamp glow looked like a real young man to her instead of the fifteen-year-old boy that he was, it would do no harm to let the illusion pass. The first daylight

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

meeting would show the error. Moreover, she was much more occupied with the fact that Leslie's plans for the dance were for a grouping which was not greatly to her mind.

She hardly heard Jack's prompt protestation that he didn't want any particular girl set aside for him. She said good-bye with gaiety but there was an undercurrent to her thoughts that came to the surface as the car swung the curve out into the faint moonlight. She spoke absently, barely above her breath.

"Well, if Leslie Masters thinks I'm going to spend quite all my time playing great-grandmother to Janey and her soldier, he's mistaken," she murmured. "Mrs. Sloan's chaperoning us anyway—and I've known Leslie forever—it isn't exciting to ——"

"Cousin Hilda, what sort of clothes do they wear at these dances?" Jack broke in on her. He evidently had not noticed her muttered words. "Are they strong on style, or just comfortable?"

Hilda came slowly out of her preoccupation. "The usual monthly dances are very informal, during the warm weather," she replied rather absently. "But this one is, as you heard, for the men who have come over from England for the tennis matches. It will be the most elaborate thing of the season, I suppose."

Something in his look made her add, tolerantly,

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“But you won’t have to bother. Everyone will know you are too young to care about formal clothes. You can wear anything you choose, really.”

His silence meant nothing to her. Jack’s clothes were a very small speck on the horizon. The cloud that was looming up large was the fact that her prettiest evening frock needed a whole panel of filmy silver-embroidered chiffon,—the sea air having tarnished it badly that last night on the yacht. Silver-embroidered chiffon is not a cheap article.

The time did not go so happily after this. Both seemed inclined to silence and lapsed into deep thought. It was a relief, at nine-thirty, to say kindly, “You have had a tiresome trip, Jack, and I’m sure you want to go to bed. I’m going in myself and see that everything is ready for you.”

Jack agreed cheerfully enough. “I generally hit the sheets about this time if I’m not studying or something,” he replied, and, after her brief inspection of his room was ended, he joined her on the landing where he shook hands with some formality.

After he had gone up and Hilda was in her own room at her desk, she could hear him moving about for a long while, and she might have wondered at his wakefulness if she had not been thinking hard about her own affairs. The memoranda of her expenses for the past few days was not easy reading.



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

The books and materials, with the Armenian check, made a large hole in her allowance.

“I can’t bother with it now, though,” she said, as she snapped the lid on the troublesome accounts. “I’ll wait till to-morrow when I’m in better trim. I haven’t put down some other little things, like car fare and lunch down-town, and I’ll try to remember them by that time. I wonder if I can get anything to match my frock at Watson’s—if Leslie expects me to spend the entire time with him, just so Janey can enjoy her soldier—well, there’s such a thing as being too unselfish—I shall simply leave old Leslie to brood over his pets and I’ll have a good time, too. Betty and Jim will be there ——”

She stood looking out at the setting moon. The slender crescent hung above the cupola of the second stable, and the dark silhouette of the frame building where the harmless snakes had found their home, reminded her of her guest. Jack’s concern about his clothes for the dance had made no impression on her, but his views as to the training of his children were too original to be forgotten.

“He seems to be hard on boys,” she thought, yawning slightly. “He knows what they are, I guess. He judges others by himself. Well, he’s a nice enough boy on the outside, and he’s going to be plenty of fun; but I’m not going to join the

## *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*

ranks of his admirers just yet. I'll wait and see. Being responsible for him, I'll simply have to be careful not to take too much on trust. I'll wait and see."

## CHAPTER VIII

### HILDA GETS HER FIRST COMMISSION

TAP, tap, tap!

It was Martha's summons on the door. With a delicious yawn Hilda aroused herself to the demands of a new day.

"Monday, and I'm to meet Mrs. Bradford at two-thirty," she thought with a pleasant thrill of expectation. As an afterthought she remembered Jack. "I shan't be alone for breakfast, either," she added happily.

It was still brilliantly clear, although the air which stirred the net curtains at the windows was noticeably warmer than Sunday's cool breeze. She dressed quickly, humming the newest song. The future was filled with pleasant duties.

She intended to storm Page Carter at the closing hour at Watson's and carry her off by force to Grey Cot (she had completely forgotten about her after Jack's arrival); she had some interesting questions to put to Mr. Dalton as to color schemes; Jack, although partly disposed of to Leslie Masters for the tennis events, was still a responsibility. Altogether



## HER FIRST COMMISSION

she was a very busy person, not counting the delightful afternoon engagement with the fascinating Mrs. Bradford, whose charities covered a multitude of charms.

As she went down the hall she thought she heard the mewling of a cat, but she paid no attention to it, —cats being excluded from Grey Cot because of Mrs. Hare's aversion to them. Her whole mind was on the plans for the day.

Jack was in the breakfast-room and she greeted him gaily. "What a gorgeous day," she said; "we might have had breakfast in the summer-house. It's just the weather for it."

He replied with polite effort but seemed rather absent. When they were seated he said abruptly, with a gesture toward his coat pocket, "I say, Cousin Hilda, would you mind if I kept this thing a while? The dogs were after it and ——"

A fluff of grey-and-white suddenly popped out of his side pocket and two big round eyes looked out on the world. A tiny Angora kitten slowly pulled itself out of its seclusion and cuddled in the crook of Jack's grey tweed arm. Hilda stared at it without much enthusiasm. She shared her mother's feeling about cats.

"It's very little and it's quite pretty," she hesitated. She hated to say that so small and helpless a creature must be denied shelter. "I suppose it

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will be all right to keep it,—in the garage or barn. You could put it in a big cage, couldn't you?" Seeing Jack's flash of amusement she added firmly, "For it would not do to lose it. It must belong to someone. Angora cats are rare, you know."

Jack appeared satisfied. "I'll fix him up in the other stable until his owner turns up," he said cheerfully, and then he tucked the little kitten back into his loose pocket and began to sugar his oatmeal with a sparing hand. "Dandy little car you've got out in the garage," he remarked cordially. "John says she's pretty fast. What can you get out of her?"

Hilda jumped to a lively account of the car's superior merits, boasting as only fond car-owners can, and offering to show its speed on the deserted race-track beyond the thicket; while Jack commented sagely and calmly contrasted makes of cars which he had driven. It was amazing how their tastes ran toward the same groove. Hilda forgot her prejudices in the excitement of the discussion, until a soft creepy sensation on the side of her skirt and a furry warmth in her lap made her start and cry out.

"Oh, Jack, take it away,—your kitten's in my lap!" she cried, recoiling from the fluffy, clawing, kneading atom. "I hate kittens when they claw like that!"

Jack raised himself in his chair to get a view of

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the intruder. "He won't hurt you," he soothed. "Clever little cuss, to have got away without my knowing, though. There, he's settling down. You'd better let him have his nap there. It's more comfy than my pocket."

Hilda's blood ran cold while the sharp little claws were kneading and treading, but Jack's smile and the kitten's sudden curling down to sleep made her check the words that were on her lips. The ringing of the telephone came like a relief call, but Jack was in the hall before she could stir. He spoke briefly and returned with a satisfied air.

"They say that some kid told them the dogs ran it into the summer-house here," he said. "They'll be over right away. It's a great pet and they're regularly daffy over it. Said it went off right after it had breakfast. A girl owns it and she says its name is—hullo, someone's coming across the wood-road now. My Jiminy, they are in a hurry!"

Hilda glanced out at the road seen between the tree trunks. A glimpse of a tam-o'-shantered head with a tail of flaming red-gold hair streaming after it was all she saw, however, for at that same instant a thump on the table beneath her plate made her jump, and in a twinkling her lap was empty and the kitten was in the air.

Bang! went the kitten's head against the table.

Whisk! went the kitten into the air!



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Hilda screamed and started up. Jack started up, too, though he did not scream. The kitten flew about in widening circles, a mere stream of dazzling grey and white, whizzing past each in turn.

Hilda gasped and seized the caraffe. "Is it mad?" she breathed as the kitten missed her head by an inch or less. "Oh, what's the matter with it?"

Whizz! bang! went the kitten, past Jack, past Hilda again. It hit the glass closet at an acute angle, knocking over a cup and shattering the glass, bolted into the great punch-bowl on the lower shelf and hung there with its paws caught through the pierced-work edge, panting and quivering into a state of collapse.

At the same moment a high clear voice cried, indignantly, "There, see what you've done,—all of you!"

A figure flashed past Hilda to the glass closet, regardless of splintered pitfalls, swooped on the palpitating kitten and lifted it from the punch-bowl. A brown tam-o'-shanter dropped from the red-gold head as its owner shook it fiercely at them both repeating vehemently, "There, see what you've done to a poor darling of a wee kitten that wouldn't hurt a fly! Frightening her into fits and never caring a bit!"

A paralyzing second of silence answered this in-

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justice and then Jack spoke sarcastically, "Seems to me you're mighty quick about blaming people who only took your kitten in because the dogs would have eaten it alive. Hadn't you better wait until you know what you're talking about?"

Hilda hastily interposed; Martha's stern face stared in at the pantry door with John's head in full view over her shoulder. Hilda spoke soothingly, for she was rather ashamed of her repugnance to the pet kitten.

"I am sure we haven't done anything to harm the poor kitten," she said. "It was taking a nap in my lap when—when ——"

"When it had a fit," put in Jack determinedly. "It had a fit from eating too much, I bet. I shouldn't wonder if you fed it meat and such stuff for its breakfast. And then blame us for its fits!" He looked rather contemptuously at the owner and it was very plain what he thought of her.

Hilda went quietly on, smiling at the flushed girl who clutched the kitten with both hands and faced them defiantly. "We really didn't do a thing to it," she repeated. "I'm sorry you feel so about it."

The girl looked steadily at her and her expression changed swiftly. She grew redder than before but her eyes no longer flashed. She glanced hastily at the wreckage of glass; at Martha who was begin-

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ning to sweep up the scattered fragments, and she spoke in a low tone. "I'm awfully sorry about the damage, if Muffins did it," she said with remorse as deep as her wrath had been hot. "I'll pay for it, of course, but I can't make up for the trouble,—unless you'll let me send you something awfully nice, like a dozen opera records for your victrola if you have one, or a set of books, or ——"

Hilda broke in on her extreme of penitence with a laugh. "We can't think of letting you do anything," she said gaily. "All we can do is to forgive all around and forget the disagreeable part. The glass closet can soon be mended, and if Muffins is all right after its—his spree, we won't say any more on the matter. Shall we shake hands and introduce ourselves? I am Hilda Hare, and this is my cousin Jack Hastings."

The girl put out a long muscular hand with curving sensitive finger-tips and grasped Hilda's hand firmly. "I'm Esther Marie Louise Skelton," she explained. "We've just come to live in the house by the pine grove. And I'm very glad to meet you, Miss Hare."

To Jack she gave only the tips of her fingers, bowing very ceremoniously. It was plain that she could not change her first opinion of him. "I have seen Mr. Hastings before," she remarked to Hilda loftily. "Yesterday—at the pond."





THE GIRL GRASPED HILDA'S HAND FIRMLY





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Then, before they could say another word, she had recovered her brown tam from the chair where Jack had laid it, and with the kitten tightly tucked under one arm, she was gone.

Jack shrugged his shoulders as he looked at her diminishing figure on the wood-road. "I swear I'll never bring another cat, kitten, or tom-cat on these premises no matter what's ailing them," he declared solemnly, adding in a livelier tone, "What a spitfire that girl is,—just like all red-heads."

Hilda laughed at his face. Although she could not deny that their visitor's manner had been unusual, she would not agree as to her hair. "It's a lovely red-gold," she insisted. "It'll be perfectly glorious when she is older. I wish that she'd stopped a bit, so that we might have known more about her. I don't know a soul in this place and it might have been interesting. She's surely unusual."

Martha passed with the dust-pan in her hand. "I think the young lady must be the same that has moved in at The Pines on Friday, Miss Hilda," she said. "Mrs. Jackson's Minnie told me there was only two grown-ups in the family, the father who's always in the city on business, and the lady who takes care of the young lady as does as she likes from morning till night. Minnie says they're grand people, and they have that great house just



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filled with foreign statuary and such. She says it's a sight to be seen."

"Like its owner," muttered Jack, who plainly could not forgive and forget the vehement Miss Skelton.

Hilda laughed again to see how entirely his easy calm had deserted him at the advent of the owner of Muffins. But she did not carry the matter further, for the clock was striking the half-hour and she had various small duties to attend to before she made ready for her lesson with Mr. Dalton.

"I'll take you down-town as far as the Monument if you'd like to go sightseeing alone," she told him as they left the dining-room. "I go on duty at ten-thirty for the morning, or I'd show you about myself."

Jack thanked her but said he would stop at home for the morning. "I haven't half seen these diggins yet," he declared. "John's promised to show me how to plant late beans. I'm thinking of being a farmer some of these days and I might as well start collecting information."

"I thought you were collecting snakes," commented Hilda as she turned to leave the room, but he had disappeared.

When she hurried out to the garage some time later she saw him with a spade and watering-pot busy with the good brown earth, and although she

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waved and called good-bye, hoping that he would be tempted to leave his work long enough to see her triumphant departure in the boasted car, he merely waved one earth-stained hand and kept on digging.

She found Mr. Dalton ready with answers to her questions and, further, he was quite willing to invite her new friend, Mrs. Bradford, to see his priceless tapestries, which he kept in the inner room. "Bring her any time you will," he said, genially. "The sooner the better, though, for I am going to move them to Washington next month."

Hilda, delighted, promised to accept his kindness at the very first moment Mrs. Bradford should be able to come and agreed with him that some morning when she was taking her lesson would be the most convenient for them both.

As she neared the Grey Cot garage, with her mind full of agreeable plans and hopes, she was startled to see a hairy, yellow object drag itself out of the inner shadows. It was not a cat. Anybody could see it was not a cat. It was too big. But it was so rolled in an old linen coat, and it dragged itself so painfully along that it was not until it emerged into the light and turned a whiskered Irish muzzle that she saw it was a badly damaged terrier.

"Why, you poor thing!" she began, halting the

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car with a jolt and bending out to see better. "What in the world ——"

The poor thing crawled an inch nearer, trying to wag a feeble tail, and Jack's voice came unexpectedly from the little room by the door, followed by Jack himself.

"He's a nice fellow I came across on the lots," he explained. "He's been run over, I think, and he's almost starved to death, too. I'm going to feed him up and doctor him a bit,—that is, if you don't mind, Cousin Hilda."

She did not mind in the least in this case, for her heart was warm toward all canine creation. She was all interest at once. She examined the forlorn grateful creature, getting iodine for the grievous wounds, and putting it on while Jack held and soothed him. Then she brought an old chair cushion and some soft rugs, and together she and Jack made a comfortable bed for the invalid in a big box in the far end of the garage. There, with some warm milk, they left him.

"He'll do very well now," said Hilda. "After lunch I'll call up Dr. Wilson. He used to tend our animals at Uplands and he'll know just what's best."

After lunch, however, she forgot all about Dr. Wilson, for the man from Miller's came to measure the broken panel of the glass closet and his estimate



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of the small curved panel was so much more than she had expected that she almost regretted her magnanimous refusal of Esther Marie Louise Skelton's offer. Another distraction arrived in the shape of a beautifully done-up parcel from Phillips' choice book-shop, which proved to be a blue leather set of James Lane Allen's works; and in the wrappings of which was a short note from the vehement Miss Skelton. Jack and Hilda read it together.

"Dear Miss Hare," it said. "Will you *ever* forgive me for acting like such a ruffian? I am perfectly positive that you were very good to Muffins, and I am horribly sorry for what I said. If you can overlook it, will you come to tea to-morrow afternoon at four-thirty? Miss DuBois hopes you may be so kind. Yours most sincerely (and sorrowfully) Esther Marie Louise Skelton. P. S. I found out that the wretch of a cook fed Muffins on raw steak. Mistaken kindness."

Jack grunted scornfully. "Sounds just like her,—rushing at things pell-mell," he commented dryly. "She's crushed on you, Cousin Hilda,—that's about it. She'll pester you to death, if you let her. I wouldn't go to her old tea if I were you."

"Pooh, you're cross because you aren't asked," retorted Hilda gaily. "Of course I shall go. I wouldn't miss the chance of seeing that house, with

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its 'foreign statuary and such' for worlds. Mercy, there's the clock striking two! I must fly ——"

"I'll be off to the tennis match myself pretty soon," said Jack, loftily. "We men aren't keen on sitting about, sipping tea on days like these. I'll think of you to-morrow,—and be sorry for you."

She laughed back at him and then halted. "Tell Leslie I'm not going to go anywhere till the dance," she said firmly. "You can go about with them all you want,—they're a nice lot, when one isn't busy. I'm too hard at work, though, to see anyone till the dance."

She drove off feeling rather proud of herself. The partnership looked rather sure to her at this moment.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ah, you are on time as usual," said Mrs. Bradford in her most cordial tone.

She was in a lovely filmy violet gown. She shook hands with Hilda and ushered her into her cool, attractive rooms without any mention of the trip to the suburbs. There were many flowers in the rooms and a tea-tray with tall glasses and delicate dishes was on the table by the east window.

Hilda looked about in surprise. "I thought you wanted me to take you ——" she began awkwardly.

Mrs. Bradford interrupted her with a pretty gesture. "Of course we are going out after while,"

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she smiled. "But in the meanwhile I have a committee meeting of the Welfare Workers,—postponed unexpectedly until to-day. I have a cup of iced tea waiting for them. After our business is over we will go,—you and I, just as we had planned."

Hilda hastily told her of Mr. Dalton's invitation, eager to make an engagement for the day of her next lesson, but Mrs. Bradford sighed. "My dear, I have every morning this week filled to the brim," she said. "I was hoping you might find a boy friend to help with the tickets at our *matinée* concert for the Ice Fund."

The clang of the elevator broke in on Hilda's promise to supply someone, and after that there was no chance for further talk. The guests came all at once, one after another clanging their way up in the elevator to the hospitable door that stood open for them. Hilda was surprised how many of them there turned out to be.

There were at least twenty,—and not all women, for Captain Mulford and Major Potts dropped in quite by chance after the others had arrived; and Mrs. Bradford said when she commissioned Hilda to see that they had tea, soldiers were not to be expected to take part in committee squabbles, so it was quite natural that Hilda as another outsider should entertain them while the others discussed



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business matters. Captain Mulford was an easy talker and Major Potts, though less brilliant and good-looking, had the most thrilling adventures to relate.

Hilda hardly knew where the time had flown when the Committee rose to take its leave and the two military men, at a slight signal from Mrs. Bradford, also got on their feet. They did not leave, however, without some pledges of future meetings. Captain Mulford insisted that Miss Hare positively must see their shack at the camp and Major Potts seconded him heartily.

Mrs. Bradford smiled as the two men disappeared into the elevator. "You ought to be flattered, my dear," she said lightly. "Archie Mulford is considered the most critical man in the regiment and Major Potts positively refuses to talk to the average girl,—he says her lack of intelligence is too pathetic."

Hilda swallowed the flattery without an effort. She smiled happily back at her friend.

"I shall love to see the camp with you," she replied.

Mrs. Bradford paused on the threshold of her bedroom to blow a kiss in response and then she disappeared to change for the drive and inspection of the Hampton Apartments.

Hilda sank down in the low chair and took up a

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magazine. But she did not even try to read. Life was infinitely more thrilling to her just at the moment than any printed page. She looked back over the last few days with great satisfaction. Jack and Page, her lessons, her future and Mrs. Bradford! Surely she had begun her probation well. She planned a letter to Jean that should satisfy her chum as to her care of the pennies.

“Is it an amusing story?” asked Mrs. Bradford’s soft voice.

Hilda looked up with a start. Her friend was standing smiling down at her and drawing on her gloves with the quick, sure gestures that Hilda so admired. The half-hour had sped with incredible swiftness,—so beguiling is the pursuit of one’s own happiness. She flung down the book with a laugh, evading the question.

“How quickly you have dressed,” she cried springing up with a glance of admiration at the severely tailored white linen and modish hat. “I couldn’t have managed it in twice the time. Are you really quite ready?”

Mrs. Bradford was quite ready. They went down to the street where the foursome was waiting and were soon on their way toward the settlement where the Hampton Apartments were located. The day was now slightly overcast and the long row of two-story apartments looked rather unin-

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viting to Hilda, in sharp contrast to her recent surroundings.

Mrs. Bradford did not seem to share her feelings, however, and she made the tour of inspection very thoroughly, going into each suite and noting every detail with great apparent interest. She made an exhaustive examination of the entire row, and they came out on the pavement just as the six o'clock chimes were sounding from St. Agatha's church far across the lots.

She turned to Hilda with a serious face. "You said you would like to help the good cause," she said. "How would it suit you to do that little square room,—my sitting-room,—for me? I shall want it very beautifully done,—not like a glorified workman's parlor but as a place where I can have my most special friends enjoy a cup of tea or a bit of music with me."

Hilda flushed with pleasure. "I'll simply adore it!" she cried warmly. "If you really want me to,—you know how to do everything so wonderfully well." And then she sobered. "But you know, I'm not a regular interior decorator yet," she added. "Perhaps you ought to wait ——"

The other broke in on her with a gay gesture. "Nonsense!" she cried. "I will trust you to any extent. You have quite good enough taste for me,—with your Mr. Dalton at your elbow. Only,"



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and here her face grew more serious, "I'd rather it were just between you and me. I don't want anyone to know of my plan until I have the place quite furnished and ready. Of course, if you insist on its being known——"

Hilda protested eagerly that she should much rather it be so. "I'll try to do it all myself, too," she said. "It will be wonderful practice for me. You're marvelously kind to trust me with it."

Mrs. Bradford laid a light hand on her arm. "My dear child, I can see what others sometimes cannot," she said quietly. "I know you are a born artist. I trust you absolutely. The only thing I hesitate about is the sum we are to spend on it. Do you think you can manage it for, well, say a thousand dollars?"

Hilda looked puzzled. She had no earthly way of knowing how much a room such as Mrs. Bradford wanted might cost. She had lived among beautiful things all her life but the price had not been thought of. She made a swift decision.

"I'll tell you what," she said in a brisk, business-like tone. "I'll go ahead with the color scheme, the draperies and such, and after I have it arranged, you can criticize. If it's too high-priced or too cheap, we can change it." She added thoughtfully, "It might be better for you to get the things after

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we had decided on them,—then you'd know they were all right."

Mrs. Bradford held up her hands. "Have mercy on my ignorance!" she cried laughing. "I know nothing of furnishings. You shall buy every single thing yourself. I don't want to see it until it is done. You see, where I trust, I trust absolutely. Bring the bills to me and I'll settle them—that is all I agree to do." She held out the small paper on which she had made careful measurements of the room, with a sketch of each wall. "Take this now, and when you want to see the room again, go to the agent at the corner apartment. I have left a key with him for our use. You are free to come when you will."

Hilda left her at the Ardsmore, marveling at her generosity and her unselfish interest in her work. She drove away with her head and heart aglow. "I wish I could be more like her," she thought wistfully. "She's willing to do all that; to go out there on the lots among those hideous small houses, just to prove the theories of the Welfare Workers. She's so good that she makes me feel ashamed."

And, completely absorbed in wonder at her new friend's goodness and delight in the task before her, she forgot Page Carter and went home, smiling at the golden future which lay just ahead.

"What news for old Jean," she thought. "What

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a chance to show Mother that I really can do something well. It's a perfect miracle that it happens now, when I can keep it for a surprise for them all. Oh, I wish I had the drawings made to show Mr. Dalton day after to-morrow. Perhaps I can do them. I'll make a stab at it, anyway."



## CHAPTER IX

### FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES

HILDA was in the summer-house deep in interior decoration.

She had spent the morning in a rush about town, comparing exhibits in the department stores with the furnishings and fabrics in her text-books. She meant to be very thorough. She had asked Jack to help with the tickets at Mrs. Bradford's matinée concert and, pleased with his ready agreement, had invited him to have lunch with her down-town. She had really enjoyed the hour spent in the cool Ritz café in spite of his candid comments. He had been slightly bored but too polite to let it be very plainly seen, but when they had returned home he rushed to the stable to refresh himself with his harmless snakes and the latest addition, the damaged terrier.

Hilda watched him swinging down the road to the woods, can in hand and the sun on his shining dark hair. At the turn he halted, looked back and then went on.

Everything was very quiet. The last roses stirred on the soft wind and a song sparrow trilled

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in the linden trees. A deep sense of peace and security was in the fragrant air and almost visible in the murmuring loveliness of the drowsy old garden.

It drew Hilda's eyes in spite of herself. Somehow it reminded her of her mother. She laid aside her books for a while and began a letter to her, telling her of the happenings of the past two days and enlarging on the goodness and charm of her new friend Mrs. Bradford. Of course, she did not mention the secret commission she held. Nor did she speak of her visits to Page Carter, as that, too, was a forbidden subject. But she did write of Jack and his fancy for animals.

"He has only been here since Sunday afternoon," she wrote with a smile, "and he has gathered in some snakes, a stray kitten and the most battered-up dog you ever saw ——"

"Help! Murder-r-r! *Help!*"

It was a cry to curdle the blood. It came from the back of the garage.

Hilda sprang to her feet. She was in the garage at John's heels, and as they reached the dim interior Jack ran in from the road, can in hand. For the fraction of a second they all halted as they saw what was happening.

A strange man, a very tattered man in red sweater and dingy cap, was caught by the leg by

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the roll of bandages that was the dog, and the man was aiming blow after blow with a tire-pump at the head and body of his steadfast captor.

“Ah, it’s you!” cried John, making a spring toward the man, while Jack flew to the dog, shouting commands of, “Drop him! Do you hear, Spot, Rover, Mike,—drop him!”

It all happened in a second, and Hilda could hardly tell which came first,—whether the dog dropped the leg that he had held so firmly, or whether the man broke loose. All she could be sure of was, that one instant the man and dog were locked together, and the next instant the man had fled through the back window with incredible lightness and speed, leaving only his cap and a piece of cloth from his ragged trousers, while the dog yelped and struggled in a vain effort to follow him.

John was the first to realize how badly the dog was injured. He stooped to pick up the cap and then he shook his head as he looked at the poor creature, who was now groveling at Jack’s feet in abject apology for his faithful guardianship of his benefactor’s property.

“He’s done for himself, poor chap, unless I’m mistaken,” he said. “That tire-pump has punished him cruel bad.”

The poor dog seemed to understand the compassion in the tone. He sat up and lifted his whisk-



## *FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES*

ered muzzle toward each in turn, a puzzled look in his small, steady eyes; and then he emitted a long mournful howl and lay down suddenly at Jack's feet. A stream of bright blood stained the grey concrete floor. There was a gasp and faint struggle and then he lay quite still.

Jack knelt by the limp bundle, and John stooped anxiously beside him, but the paw that Jack lifted dropped lifelessly again. Jack's voice was husky as he said softly, "He's gone out."

"He has that," said John, kneeling to examine the body of the faithful beast. "He's busted open all them wounds of hisn, poor chap. He died game, though. And that's the best any of us can do."

Jack straightened out the doubled-up paws and smoothed the rough head very tenderly. He said not a word but he looked very stern. Hilda understood how he was feeling. The devotion of the poor stricken dog had touched hidden depths of tenderness.

John, looking down upon the pathetic mass of tawny fur and bloody bandages, said earnestly, "Mebbe he wasn't so much to look at, but he sure did his part like a man." And then he added, in another tone, "And now, thanks to him, that thieving Bill Caffrey will pay for his capers. I've always suspected him of those tires that we've been

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

losing, but now, with the cap and all, I guess it's a pretty clear case. I'll step over to the constable's and see about it."

As he left them, Hilda put a hand on Jack's arm. His silence and the look in his eyes made her very sorry for him. "Let's bury him in the thicket where the laurel bushes are," she said softly. "He's been enough of a hero to have laurel all the year."

Jack nodded, and together they lifted the poor, shattered body and laid it on an improvised stretcher. In the green thicket where the birds were singing, Jack dug a grave and they laid the limp body in the warm brown earth. The pity of it laid a finger on Hilda's lips and she said no word until Jack had filled the grave and she had covered it with shining laurel twigs.

"'Faithful unto death,'" she quoted softly. "It's a pretty good epitaph, isn't it? Worth trying for, any time," and then she went quickly back to the house knowing that he would rather be left alone. The tragedy had made her very compassionate.

Jack was rather silent as he left for the tennis courts. He did not mention the incident, except to report that John had missed the constable at first and then it had been found that Bill Caffrey had departed without any farewells; and the case against him must await his discovery or return.

## *FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES*

The large car from The Pines came promptly at half after four. Hilda was more than ready. She was eager to compare the treasures of The Pines with the results of her morning's work. There might be inspiration in the arrangement of the rooms at the big house.

She found her hostesses, however, on the wide sumptuous porch and there, too, was the apparatus for tea. There was no reason for going indoors at all as she acknowledged to herself with some regret. Miss DuBois turned out to be an elderly gracious lady of rather timid manner who acted as the head of the imposing establishment. It was very plain that she was merely a figurehead as far as Miss Skelton was concerned, for, though Esther Marie, as it turned out she was usually called, was very affectionate and considerate of her amiable chaperone, she undoubtedly lived her life according to her own fancy.

"I'm going in for collections this summer," she told Hilda after they were settled on the wide terrace beneath the spreading white pines. "It's just the place here for that sort of thing. Grasses and mosses and tree forms and birds,—I finished flowers last summer,—they are all about everywhere you look. I have five separate collections begun but the snakes are the best of all,—harmless ones, you know."



## HILDA OF GREY COT

Miss DuBois pouring the hot tea on the heaped ice sighed helplessly. "Miss Hare may not be interested in these things, my dear," she suggested. To Hilda she added with a sweet apologetic smile, "Esther Marie is apt to ride her hobbies too hard, Miss Hare, but you must not allow her to trouble you too much. She forgets that other people are not so deeply interested as she."

Esther Marie flashed a smile at her old friend and shook her red-gold mane buoyantly. "Indeed and indeed, I don't forget, dear Aunty Lavendar," she cried. "You don't *let* me forget it. I don't bother other people but Miss Hare is different,—she understands. I'm perfectly positive that she'll adore my dear snakes and I'm going to show them to her directly we've finished."

She looked so fresh and gay in her pretty, filmy frock and dainty slippers that she quite won Hilda's heart. She seemed very unlike the young tornado who had swept into the breakfast-room at Grey Cot two days ago. Her enthusiasm and her fervent admiration of Hilda were very fetching to that discerning young lady.

"I'll love to see the snakes," she said warmly, and she meant it, though it had not yet seemed worth while to her to go as far as the black stable at Grey Cot to view Jack's watery pets.

Miss DuBois smiled doubtfully. "Well, if you

## *FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES*

really care to," she acquiesced, and then she turned the talk to other subjects,—the latest news, the difficulty of getting good biscuits nowadays and the wonderful work of the Emergency Aid in which she was deeply interested.

Esther Marie sat quietly by, occupied with her clinking glass and throwing in an intelligent word now and then,—and Hilda was impressed by the clear decision of those words,—until the tea-tray was about to be removed; when she jumped up eagerly.

"Now we'll go see the Reptilians," she announced. "Come along please, Miss Hare."

Hilda hesitated, but Miss DuBois shook her head. "Oh, no, my dear, I never visit that building, if I can possibly avoid it," she said gently. "I shall be very well occupied with my knitting."

Esther Marie put an arm through Hilda's as they went toward the low wooden sheds where the snakes were to be found. And she talked,—it was wonderful how rapidly she talked. She seemed bent on pouring out her whole life and heart to her new friend.

She told of her motherless little girlhood in the hotels and schools of Europe with an absolute unconsciousness of pathos; she drew a picture of her indulgent, absorbed father that entirely charmed her hearer; she spoke of Miss DuBois with great

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affection. Altogether she showed such a lovable, warm, impetuous nature that Hilda was delighted with her. The snakes were a very small part of the expedition, although enough was said about them to impress some names on Hilda's mind.

When she said good-bye to Miss DuBois and Esther Marie on the terrace, she was genuinely sorry to leave. The atmosphere of adulation she had breathed during her hour at The Pines was very exhilarating.

Esther Marie had wanted to ride back with her but Miss DuBois had been firm. Hilda was rather glad afterward that she had been. As the car deposited her at the side gate where she had told the chauffeur to let her down, she saw two figures coming slowly along the grassy road by the thicket.

"Great goodness!" was all she could say.

And then, after another amazed look, she turned to stare blankly at the approaching pair, unconscious of the chauffeur's slow exit.

"Great goodness, where did he dig up that wreck?" she breathed.

The gaunt, bony horse limped painfully along, led carefully by Jack, who was so intent on his charge that he had not noticed the car. The horse was so pitifully thin that his bones actually stuck out of his skin in places. He ambled wearily, dragging his feet with difficulty, as Jack gently



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urged him toward the back entrance to the grounds.

The sight of his cousin's petrified form caught his eye just as he was turning the exhausted beast into the gravel driveway and he turned to wave excitedly at her. He did not seem to feel there was anything surprising about the affair, though, and when Hilda hurried after him, he turned to face her with all the confidence of sure sympathy.

"I bought him from a beast who was building a fire under him!" he burst out fiercely as soon as they met. "He was building a fire under him because he couldn't make him drag a great, heavy wagon up a steep hill. I was going to get him arrested for cruelty but there wasn't any policeman, and so I bought him instead. I paid him five dollars,—just what the Phosphate Works gives for dead ones,—and I'm going to take care of him for a while, if you don't mind, Cousin Hilda. I'll pay for his feed and take care of him."

Hilda looked at the poor feeble animal with meekly drooping head and half-closed eyes, and sympathy for its weakness checked the laughter gathering on her lips.

"Of course, you can keep it here for a while," she agreed, warmly. "I don't suppose John will mind ——"

John emerged from the little room unexpectedly.

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He took the bridle out of Jack's hand. He had evidently heard enough to satisfy him as to what must be done. "I'll take charge of the beast, Miss Hilda," he said soberly. "I'm thinking the creature needs more experienced treatment than Master Jack has at command."

Hilda watched the three, John, Jack and the limping horse, go slowly toward the barn, and then she turned to Martha, who had come out to see what was going on.

"He's bent on bringing in all the forlorn creatures he meets," she said helplessly. "And they keep on getting larger and larger. I suppose it will be a lame elephant next."

"Ah, but he has the kind nature, Miss Hilda," Martha remonstrated. "You couldn't well refuse,—after that poor dog that John's been telling me of. And he's so nice about it,—'if you don't mind' he says quite humble and polite-like. Ah, yes, he's a kind heart, has Master Jack."

"Oh, yes, he seems to be meek enough about it," laughed Hilda. "But he brings them in before he asks,—he has to rescue them on the instant,—and one can't be inhuman enough to deny him. But I certainly shall draw the line at the elephant."

Jack came in to dinner with an oddly mixed manner. He was enthusiastic about the horse, predicting that it would make a fine animal in time,—

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and here he frowned at Hilda's giggle,—and he quoted John with great emphasis in regard to the method of feeding a starved animal. “We're going to go slow on the feed at first,” he told her. “A little at a time and more as he gets used to it. He'll be a horse to be proud of some day.”

He was not at all interested as to Hilda's visit to The Pines and listened to her account with scant courtesy, even when she spoke of matters that should have interested him.

“Your red-haired girl, as you call her, has a lot of snakes in her collection,” she told him as the iced bouillon was set before them. “It's quite wonderful how many she seems to have gotten in such a short time. You ought to go over to see them.”

“Funny thing for a girl to take up, isn't it? I should think she'd rather stick to something more in her line,” he replied indifferently. “I saw that Janey Sloan at the tennis court to-day and she was asking after you. She says she'll be over to-morrow to see you about the Field Day. I said I'd go. She's going to give me four waltzes at the dance. I can waltz pretty well.”

He then said he had letters to write after dinner and would go right up, if she didn't mind. The talk was fitful after this, and was mainly kept up by Hilda, who, happening to recall some clever speech of Mrs. Bradford's about dancing, repeated



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it and then described the lady, her generousities and her many charms. She simply had to talk to someone and Jack was not absolutely deaf.

"Sounds too perfect for me," he commented at last. "I bet she isn't a patch on Aunt Cynthia. Is she now, honest?"

"W-well," hesitated Hilda, "she's so entirely different, you know! She's perfectly lovely, though. She always says and does exactly the right thing."

"Sounds as if she were stuck on herself," grinned Jack. "I'll take Aunt Cynthia every time." Then he excused himself and went up-stairs.

Hilda went to her own room to finish the interrupted letter and after she had ended her account of the people at The Pines, and of Jack's latest protégé, she went to the window just in time to see Jack's slim form drop from the lower branches of the big ash by his window and disappear among the shadows of the lindens toward the gate.

A swift rush of curiosity made her strain her eyes through the young moonlight to catch a glimpse of him as he turned to close the wicket. There was a distinct gleam of white squares in his hand and her curiosity ebbed.

"He's probably only going to mail his letters," she told herself with a laugh. "And he prefers risking his neck to coming down-stairs like a Chris-

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tian. Boys are more like monkeys than anything else, I do believe."

It was a couple of hours later that, looking from her window toward the spot where the new grave was, she saw something white gleaming through the shadows, and, on going softly down-stairs and out to the spot, found the white object to be a white wooden tombstone with an inscription that brought the ready tears to her eyes. "Faithful unto death. August 6." She knew that Jack had paid this tribute, and her thoughts of him were very tender as she went back to her room and to bed.

"I'll never say a word no matter what he brings in after this," she told herself earnestly. "Love of animals is a fine thing and it ought to be encouraged."

She had quite forgotten her first opinion of him and was almost ready to join the ranks of his warmest admirers. The next day, however, brought a change of heart.

"I did hope she'd get some of his report," said the landlady.

"She broke off as the messenger boy was turned in and she turned toward him eagerly, holding out her hand for the envelope. "Perhaps she's changed her mind," she began.

"But the boy did not give her the telegram. He looked at Jack who also had started forward.



## CHAPTER X

### A CHANGE OF HEART

THE telegram began it.

It came just after the mail had been opened and Hilda had read her mother's disappointing news. Mrs. Hare had said that she could not come home for at least two weeks, as she was going to take Cousin Alice to Mount Clemens as soon as she was able to be moved and that she should stay with her there until the nurse, who was temporarily laid up with an abscess in her ear, should be able to take charge again.

"That means we'll have to do without her for the dance," she said, looking up at Jack with clouded eyes, sure of his regret. "I did hope she'd get home for the dance and Field Day."

She broke off as the messenger boy was ushered in and she turned toward him eagerly, holding out her hand for the envelope. "Perhaps she's changed her mind," she began.

But the boy did not give her the telegram. He looked at Jack, who also had started forward.



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“Mr. John Howard Hastings?” he asked in his impersonal official voice. “Sign here, please,” and he offered a stubby pencil for the signature.

Jack took the pencil quickly. “Yes, it’s for me,” he replied, and from his manner Hilda got the impression that he had been expecting the message. Her fears rose in a flash.

“Oh, Jack, it isn’t bad news from your Aunt Alice?” she asked, as the boy tucked his book in his pocket and went out. “Do tell me what it is.”

Jack backed off as though he feared she might take the paper from his hand. “It isn’t anything,” he assured her. “Really, it isn’t.”

He seemed so flustered that her fears grew positive. She faced him with reproachful eyes. “Please tell me, Jack,” she urged. “If it’s anything serious, I ought to know,” and she held out her hand insistently. She was ready to be very kind and comforting if the news were really as bad as Jack’s flushed face and disturbed manner indicated. “Please,” she said very gently.

Jack hesitated. “It isn’t anything,” he began again, and he thrust the telegram into her hand with a gesture that was anything but grateful. “Well, there, if you must butt in,” he blurted out. “But it isn’t any of your business, you know.”

Hilda, stung by this reception of her sympathy,

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read with puzzled eyes the words on the yellow sheet. "Nothing doing. Short on style. Better higher. J. J. W." "What in the world?" she said in bewilderment. Jack seemed stung beyond endurance. He glared at her for a moment quite as he had glared at the Skelton girl. "It's a wonder you don't understand it, since you're so all-fired smart," he said sharply. "But you needn't think I'm going to explain it, for I'm not. It's something that doesn't concern you at all, and," he added, cooling slightly, "it's perfectly all right, anyway. Don't think it isn't perfectly straight. It's all right. Only it's my own business."

And with that he took the telegram, folded it, thrust it into his pocket, and, before Hilda could find a suitable reply, he was at the door, where he turned to say almost in his usual fashion, "I'll go get the car. It's about time to be off. I'll bring her around while you get your hat."

There was nothing to do but accept the matter as it was. If Hilda wanted an explanation, she knew she must come to an open rupture with her cousin. His manner left no doubts on that score. She sighed over the perversity of human affairs in general and boys in particular as she went for her hat and gloves. All her former opinions of Jack's real character rose up in full strength. She tried con-



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scientiously to repress them but they clamored for a hearing!

Nevertheless, she was quite amiable on the drive down-town. She was supported by the feeling that she was heaping coals of fire on her secretive young cousin's head. It was the morning he was to help at the ticket office of the matinée concert for the Ice Fund and she knew that Mrs. Bradford would be in charge. She could think of no more pleasing duty than serving in the palm-shaded lobby under the gracious superintendence of this lovely woman. Of course, there would be girls there,—girl ushers and all that,—but Mrs. Bradford far outshone any mere girl in Hilda's mind.

She dropped Jack at the hotel entrance with the promise of meeting him there at twelve-thirty, and then went about her errands. She stopped at Watson's and saw Page Carter for a few minutes. It was early for glove customers and Page had time to show her the latest letter from South America, and some snapshots of Carter on the tennis court at the English Club.

"He's awfully fine-looking. I don't wonder you want him to have his partnership," said Hilda with enthusiasm. "He looks like someone important already."

Page glowed at the praise. She looked rather pale and tired but her cheeks flushed and her eyes



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shone as she spoke of her beloved brother. "He's mighty fine to me," she said simply. "When he's wealthy, he'll give me everything I want. He's like that. I wouldn't let him know all this," she waved to her surroundings, "no, not for the world. He'd send straight off to me to go back to the Marta-Marie, even if he had to work for years to make just enough to keep me there."

Hilda was so impressed that she did not insist when Page gently refused to come to Grey Cot just yet. Such a brother was worth much sacrifice. She made her promise, though, that she would come for long drives and perhaps a little picnic for two on Saturday afternoon or Sunday. Page confessed she should love the picnic. "I take long walks to the country on Sundays now," she told Hilda, "but I get mighty tired. I'm not very good at walking."

Hilda went to her lesson with a sense of being a decided factor in the world's work. She was surely making Page Carter's life happier and she was entrusted with an important commission from Mrs. Bradford.

Mr. Dalton's approval of her industry of the past day made her still more satisfied.

"You are doing better than I thought possible, Miss Hilda," he told her, looking over the sketches and calculations she showed him. "For a girl who

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has only been at it about a fortnight, you've done wonders. Jean will have to step lively to get ahead of you. I told her so when we ran down to the Hartford gardens, but she didn't seem worried. Either she's very generous or very sure of her own ability to get there."

Hilda laughed. "Jean's awfully clever," she said earnestly. "She won't have to half try."

Nevertheless, the kind words added to her happiness and she went to meet Jack in a more friendly mood than when they had parted.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked as he met her. "Was it a success?"

He smiled at her genially. "Was it?" he echoed. "Well, rather. We took in over three hundred dollars in that little hall. The music was great, too. A fellow with a fiddle that was the best ever, and a girl at the piano, well, she could play. Aren't you going to get out? I thought we were to lunch here?"

An impulse made Hilda shake her head. "Let's go to the 'Green Parrot,'" she suggested. "It's just a bit farther down and it's awfully cozy,—fixed up all in cool green linen for summer, you know."

He got in and they started. They were half-way down the block when he spoke. "Well, I've seen your wonderful Mrs. Bradford," he remarked casually.



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Hilda turned eagerly. "What do you think of her?" she asked.

His reply was brief and emphatic, delivered with a convincing nod of the head.

"Punk!"

Hilda almost bounced off the seat. Her face flushed and her eyes flashed. All the blood within her rose in one hot flame of resentment.

"How can you speak of her like that?" she cried.

"She's far, far better than anyone you can know, and she's perfectly beautiful and patriotic and unselfish,—why, there isn't another soul who gives so much time and money as she,—no, not even Mother. You needn't look at me that way, for it's true. Mother does take lots of time for teas and things, while Mrs. Bradford works all the time for the country and the destitute. She's almost a saint, and I won't listen to such horrid things about her!"

Jack listened to the end of her tirade and then he whistled a soft note of surprise. "All right, all right," he returned dryly. "Just as you say. You know best, of course," and not another word would he utter, much to her disgust. It was impossible to argue with a person who would not reply.

They passed the "Green Parrot" without seeing it, but she drew up a block farther down. She spoke with crushing calmness. "I believe I shan't have time for lunch with you to-day after all. We



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grown-up people have many duties that you boys can't understand. I shall ask you to have a good luncheon wherever you choose. Where shall I take you,—the Ritz or the Cheshire?"

He did not seem at all discomposed by her change of plans. "I'll try the Automat," he responded evenly. "Good food and plenty of it. Exercise while you feed. You ought to recommend it to that concert leader of Mrs. Bradford's, Cousin Hilda. She's putting on flesh something scandalous,—she could hardly get up on the stage this morning."

Although this absurd shaft rankled, Hilda gave no sign. She swept him up to the ornamental portals of his chosen dining place with silent dexterity. Then she munificently drew a two-dollar note from her pocket and handed it to him in the sight of the passers-by. "Get anything you want," she told him in her most elderly tone.

Jack looked at it a moment before he took it. Then he pocketed it deliberately. "You're awfully kind, I am sure," he said elaborately, bowing in the most ceremonious manner.

He turned and disappeared into the lunch rooms.

Hilda drove slowly home, her annoyance at what she termed Jack's impertinence growing. Even the prospect of an afternoon to be spent in search of materials for the color combination for Mrs.

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Bradford's room did not do much to lighten her mood.

"I simply can't forgive him for such injustice," she told herself firmly, and she felt entirely justified in her decision.

An hour or two later, when Jack returned with an offer to clean the car, she met him with cool dignity. She thanked him, but declined. Her extreme politeness had its effect on Jack.

"See here, Cousin Hilda," he began rather uncomfortably. "About that telegram ——"

"I am not at all interested," she interposed loftily. "As you pointed out, it is entirely your own affair."

He flushed but made no reply for a moment, and then he said in a low tone, "Perhaps I'd better try a week at Williams'. They've been wanting me, you know, and maybe you'll get over your hump by that time."

The insinuation that their unfriendliness was of her own making was too much for Hilda's patience. She faced him with firm lips.

"I cannot allow you to leave until Mother comes home," she announced with authority. "I am responsible for you until then, I believe, and I insist that you stay right here. It may be very disagreeable to you but you will have to put up with it."

To her surprise he seemed relieved. "All right,"



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he agreed readily. "I'll stay." He added, with a swift change of tone, "I won't bother you any more than I can help, though. Don't think it."

His spurt of spirit clinched the matter. They separated in chilly silence and Hilda went to her tour of the stores with a conviction that her mother's judgment as to Jack had been seriously at fault. "He's a perfect young imp at heart, just as I feared," she said crisply. "And I had begun to think she might be right, after all."

She had rather good luck in locating the needed materials, and then went to report to Mrs. Bradford. Here again she was fortunate in finding her friend at home. She was lovely in a beautiful embroidered kimono with her monogram on the sleeve, an idea of her own, as she told Hilda.

"I got two of them at Harkin's and sent one to my dear old friend in Boston," she said. "They are wonderful pieces of silk and rather cheap, too. But what have you here? It looks like the makings of a whole houseful of beauty. Is it for my little room?"

Hilda explained and asked for criticism, but Mrs. Bradford waved her off, laughing. "I told you, you cautious creature, that I wouldn't be consulted," she declared. "No, not even the color. I leave it all absolutely to you. Get what you will within reason and bring the bills to me at once."



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"All I ask is to pay the bills. If I think they are getting too steep, you may be sure I'll tell you so."

The contrast between this generosity and Jack's verdict smote Hilda most keenly as she thought it over on the way home. It was the rank injustice of it that hurt her, she told herself. Injustice was always hateful, no matter how it might be softened or disguised.

So when she met Jack exercising his bony, feeble steed at a gentle walk on the road past the woods she did not melt as she might have earlier in the day. She merely nodded and drove on into the Grey Cot gate without a single backward glance.

There was a strange car slowing down at the front of the house and a tall, thin young man got out and went toward the front door. Hilda hastened to meet him before he had reached the bell.

He turned, bowing and taking off his stiff straw hat in a ceremonious way. He was a blonde and very serious. From the car two freckled boys of about fourteen and sixteen stared openly at Hilda.

"I have a note from Mrs. Williams," the young man said in a very precise manner. "It is for Miss Hilda Hare. Regarding Mr. Jack Hastings," and he bowed again.

"Oh," said Hilda in surprise as she held out her

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hand for the note. "From Mrs. Williams? I don't think I quite know who she is." As soon as the words were out of her mouth she blushed for her awkwardness. "I mean," she added hastily, "that I have heard Jack speak of the two boys, but I thought they were at a camp with their tutor."

The young man bowed again. "I have that honor," he replied sedately. "But the camp is quite near Stonecroft, the home of Mrs. Williams, and she visits her sons daily. She does not take a vacation from her duties as a mother. She has written her desires to you, I believe."

Hilda smiled at the boys and at the serious young man. "If you will come in," she began, and added at the consternation on the three faces, "or if you will let me read Mrs. Williams' letter right here, I can see if a reply is needed," and she tore the envelope, while the tutor once more bowed and the boys stared harder than ever.

Jack appeared as she began the little note and the two boys woke from their tranced attention to Hilda, jumping out of the car and rushing to him with loud greetings and explanations of their visit. He knew what they had come for quite as soon as did Hilda. And he seemed to be very glad they had put in their appearance at this moment.

"I'll go, all right, if Cousin Hilda says so," she



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heard him tell the older boy, and she could not resist flashing a look to see how he really seemed to feel about it. He looked serene as usual and he was plainly glad to see the boys.

Hilda folded Mrs. Williams' kind note. She spoke to the tutor. "What sort of clothes will he need?" she asked, and the boys knew that Jack's visit was assured. They raced off together to his room, where the tutor followed on Hilda's suggestion, and their voices could be heard ringing joyfully out on the pleasant summer air, wrangling over needed articles and arguing excitedly about equipment. Then they all came down again, stiffening into propriety as they reached the summer-house where she waited.

She caught Jack's voice in the rear of the little procession, and it held a note of reproach. "What did you write that telegram out so plain for?" he asked. "I'd have made it ——"

The other boy snickered, but his reply was lost in the farewells and in the confusion of stowing Jack's belongings and themselves away in the car. After he had gone and the car was only a point on the distant road, she turned to the back precincts. In the hurry Jack must have forgotten to give any instructions about his animals. She went to the back door, where Martha and John could be seen in the kitchen, talking together.



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Martha cried out as she saw Hilda at the step. She came forward with a green dollar note in her hand.

“Ah, I’ve said many a time that he’s got the kind heart,” she said warmly. “And look at this he gave me just now. And him taken aback as you may say, by surprise. It’s not many a young gentleman would have remembered his pets or anything at such a time.”

John nodded over her shoulder. “I’ll see to the snakes and the horse, too, Miss Hilda,” he remarked solemnly. “You don’t need to think of them, I do assure you. He’s left enough to pay for all that’s needed for a good two weeks. I’ll see to them, indeed I will.”

Hilda pondered these things as she went to her room to make ready for her lonely dinner, which she had decided to have in the summer-house. She thought of Jack’s verdict on Esther Marie and she laughed. She recalled his tenderness to the poor, helpless creatures he had befriended and she softened toward him. But when his verdict upon Mrs. Bradford came to her mind she shook her head impatiently.

“Of course he likes animals,—all boys do,” she thought. “And of course he doesn’t like girls of his own age,—no boy does. But for a young snip like him to say such things about an adorable per-

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son like Mrs. Bradford is absolutely too much to be tolerated.”

She brushed her fluffy hair with great energy. “No, it’s not to be tolerated,” she said emphatically. “When he comes back he will simply have to retract that horrid speech, or ——”

She did not say what would happen if Jack did not change his mind, but it was clear she meant to be very positive in her course with that young person. Suddenly her face lighted up.

“What a fine chance to work like a perfect demon on that room for the Hampton!” she said jubilantly. “I do believe I’ll postpone asking Page to-morrow,—Jack’s sure to stay longer than he thinks. That will give me a free foot. And I do so want to get it done soon. If I work all the time on it I ought to have it ready when Mrs. Bradford has her other things in shape to move in.”

## CHAPTER XI

### REALITIES

THE next few days were very busy ones for Hilda. She plunged into the arrangement of Mrs. Bradford's little room with her whole heart. She drew and matched and altered her plan until, one morning when she showed it to Mr. Dalton, he told her it was as well as she might hope to do.

That was the real starting point.

After that morning she went to work with redoubled ardor. She made a careful study of the price and quality of the goods required and submitted the total to the laughing Mrs. Bradford, with whom she spent many of her odd minutes in this fervid chase for effects. That lady, just as usual, waved the paper from her.

"Get what you need and bring the bills," she insisted. "When you've reached the five-hundred mark, let me know. I trust you absolutely."

Hilda was still much flattered, but now she was a bit perplexed. She had begun to buy some few articles with her own money, but they were so few and the amount so small that she blushed to men-



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tion them to the lavish Mrs. Bradford. She left her friend in a rather puzzled state that day. She went home and got out her account book.

“It’s only three weeks and a couple of days,” she thought, tapping her pen against her teeth idly as her eye ran down the column of expenses. “I’ve kept inside my allowance, as far as my own things are concerned. But that curtain stuff just about cleaned me out. I’ve only two dollars left for the rest of the month. I don’t know ——”

She sat staring at the book while her mind ran over her resources. If she wanted to go on with Mrs. Bradford’s room,—and she was very sure she did,—she must spend much more money,—where was it to come from?

She sighed as she faced the alternatives. She might frankly tell her friend that she needed an advance. That would be horrid. She might use the household money and refund when Mrs. Bradford paid her. She shrank from this course at once and forever,—if she could not manage on her own hook, she would give it all up. There was a third way, however, and that looked fairly sure to her.

“I’ll do it,” she said firmly. “I’ll get the goods on my own account at the stores,—I’ll have a separate one now, anyway. And I’ll be responsible. Mrs. Bradford will pay me as soon as I ask her. It’s perfectly safe.”

## REALITIES

She felt much relieved and the next day she opened her account with Harkin's, and Smith and Sons. She needed only wall paper, draperies and curtains as yet. She made her first purchases and sent them home, feeling that she had taken an important step on her way toward success. "It's really started now. I wish it were done and I could write Mother and Jean and Elizabeth all about it," she thought, as she left the counter.

She was so deeply interested now that she simply could not spare a moment for other things. Her mornings,—three a week,—with Mr. Dalton and her afternoons spent in the shops, in her own room, and with an occasional visit to the room in Mrs. Bradford's flat in the Hampton Row so filled her time that she forgot to be lonely, forgot Page Carter, forgot everything that was not part of her task as Interior Decorator.

She haunted all the art shops. She knew where the daintiest porcelains and rarest fabrics were to be had. And when Mr. Dalton again complimented her on her progress she laughed happily, telling him to remember the donkey and the bunch of hay. Her whole mind was set on her work and she missed only those who might help her in that line.

"I wish Esther Marie and her family had not gone off to the Canadian Rockies just as we got

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

acquainted," she thought. "That house might have been an inspiration. However, I've chosen my colors and accessories and I'd have to stick to them. I hope I can have the room finished before Mother gets back, though."

She pictured her triumph, and it was very sweet to her. The partnership was within her grasp. She sorely needed a confidant, though, and longed for her freedom of speech again. When she would be released from her promise to Page Carter and when the room was done, she would never, never, never have another secret.

She rose and yawned. Mechanically she went to the window, for the dear, familiar view of lawn and garden and thicket, and the glimpse of wood-road beyond. She looked absently, her mind not on the scene but on her account book.

"It's queer how money shrinks," she thought, uneasily. "It looks twice as much before you get it in your own hands. That hundred looked pretty big to me,—before I got it."

Something moving among the trees on the wood-road drew her attention from the dismal subject of finance. It was John leading Jack's poor horse slowly up and down. A blue-plaid fly-sheet covered the animal from withers to tail but its outlines showed plainly under the thin linen cover. Hilda had a brief picture of a drooping head, a series of



## REALITIES

acute angles and a long, thin black tail. Then the two figures passed out of sight and the sound of the stable gate came a moment after.

"Poor old wreck, he'll never be any better, for all John says," she thought. "That plan of his to give him such a little bit to eat doesn't seem to work. I believe if a person's been starved they need good food and plenty of it. Jack will be fearfully disappointed in him when he comes back."

Then suddenly, unaccountably, the thought of Page stung her sharply. It was more than a week since Jack left, and she had not seen her in all that time. She glanced at the clock. She still had time to reach Watson's if she hurried and she might persuade Page to come out at once. She flew down to the garage and was off in a jiffy.

The bored girl with the side-bobs hardly looked at her this time. She was plainly resolved not to encourage Hilda's troublesome habit of asking for Miss Carter when Miss Carter was not there. She threw a note of utter weariness into her voice as she said, "Been off for three days. No, she hasn't left. Sick," and she turned to the saleswoman next and began a lively account of the last night's dance.

Hilda went off in a whirl of contrition. She forgot the speed laws and was in Page's suburb in a shorter time than she had ever made it before.

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

The shabby house looked rather better than before. The geraniums in front of the porch and the honeysuckle on its jig-saw pillars gave a touch of brightness and a whiff of sweet odor that cheered Hilda greatly. She felt that Page could not be so very ill or the place would have looked sadder than it did.

A tired woman in draggled white answered her eager ring.

"Miss Carter?" she repeated. "Oh, yes, I remember seeing you before. You brought her home in your automobile a couple of times, didn't you?"

Hilda broke in on her rambling speech. "I have just heard that she is ill and I've come to see her," she interposed. "May I go up-stairs at once?"

The woman looked at her with a troubled air. "You may go up if you wish," she replied vaguely. "But she isn't there. She's in the hospital."

"In the hospital?" echoed Hilda blankly. "What hospital? When did she go?"

"The Hoffman—and yesterday," responded the woman. "She just would go. She said I had too much on my hands with Ben's rheumatism and my mother bedfast with paralysis. I didn't want her to leave, but she just would go."

"What is the matter with her?" Hilda managed to ask. She was shocked at the picture of real distress called up by the woman's words, and she was

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touched, too, by the genuine kindness of the burdened, patient woman. "Is she very ill?"

"I don't really know," the other answered doubtfully. "She kept fainting at first and then she got pretty sick, and the doctor said she'd better be taken off my hands. But he said it was nothing serious. That's all I know about it. I am going over tomorrow to see her. I haven't had a chance yet."

Hilda left with some murmured hopes as to Page's condition and the rapid improvement of the patients in the small, shabby house. She hardly heard the voluble replies that answered her, nor did she notice the geraniums and the honeysuckles as she went down the steps of the little porch. The place had lost its happy look and seemed indescribably sad and forlorn.

"Page in a hospital all alone," she thought, with a great rush of pity and affection. "Oh, it seems too hard for her,—she's so gentle and dainty and sweet. I can't go to her now, but I'll fly there the first minute I've changed and had a bite at home."

As she drove through the summer-time fragrance of the roads leading to her own section she sighed deeply.

"Poor Page, I'll have to find out what she needs and see that she gets it. It's too horrid for her to be ill and alone in this weather!"

She had another surprise when she reached home.



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Jean was waiting for her in the lounging chair under the lindens.

“Jean,” she cried, hurrying to her with outstretched hands. “How lovely to find you here. I was just getting a bit blue, and I hated to think of another dinner alone. You’ve come to stay a while, haven’t you?”

Jean responded to her welcome with more warmth than usual, but she shook her head. “I’m going at once,” she said. “I had to see you before I left. I knew you’d want to know.”

There was something about her that stopped Hilda’s laughing questions about landscape gardening. She put an eager hand on Jean’s arm. “It isn’t Hal?” she asked anxiously.

Jean nodded. “Yes, it’s Hal,” she answered in a low tone. “We’ve been cabling forever, it seems to me, though it’s only been three days. And Mother has made all the arrangements. We’re going over; we sail to-morrow.”

Hilda could only look her question. Jean understood. “He’s alive,” she replied, in an even tone that hid her pain. “He wants to come home. Uncle Will is there, you know, and he’s arranged everything. He has lots of influence and he says he’ll bring Hal to Havre, where we will meet him and bring him home if ——” She hesitated for a second and then went on, “Mother wants to see

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him, of course, as soon as she can. So we sail tomorrow."

Hilda put her arm around her and they stood silent for a brief moment. Each knew the other's heart. Jean's twin brother was very dear to Hilda, for the three had grown up an inseparable trio. During the two years Hal had been with the American forces abroad the two girls had watched and hoped together and when he had come back, after the armistice, the trio had celebrated with great rejoicings. Since his enlistment in the Polish flying squadron they had had many an anxious moment and Hilda's first question after a separation had always been for Hal.

Jean stood with her head bent and her hand tight in Hilda's. The happy birds were singing all about them and the distant laughter of playing children came floating on the perfumed air. The ordered peaceful beauty of the little garden suddenly smote Hilda into speech.

"Oh, it can't be true," she cried. "War and destruction and greed, all there in the outside world! When will it stop,—when will people stop being brutes and learn to be human beings again?"

Jean raised her head. Her face was white and her eyes were full of pain. "Sometimes I think it will go on until every single person in the world has suffered enough to learn to be kind to others," she

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said slowly. "And then again, I think God will show us the way suddenly, in some great miracle of love. I don't know——" Then she came back to her every-day self and added, "You'd like to send a line to Hal, wouldn't you? I'll wait a bit while you write."

Hilda hesitated. She wanted to know more. "If you could tell me just how he is," she began.

Jean nodded. She told Hilda that Hal's plane had been hit and the engine smashed while he was flying alone. He had managed to land within the lines but had crashed in a small woods. He was badly injured and he had lain unattended for some hours. A heavy rain had come up and when at last they had found him, he was unconscious. From the first it had seemed impossible to save him. Exposure and injuries had wrecked his strength. "You know he was slightly gassed in the Argonne," Jean ended. "And mustard gas never lets up. He'd have been all right if he hadn't been soaked for hours,—or so Uncle Will thinks. But Hal always said he'd rather go out doing something that counted than to drag along for an eternity like a tame tabby."

Her tone was so exactly that of Hal in the old gay days that they both smiled. Hilda flung up her head. "That's the only way for a man to feel," she said with her face alight. "If the kings of the



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world are to bring their glory and honor into that other world, it won't be the crowned and sceptered royalties of the earth. It'll be the ones like Hal,—kings of their own destiny, rulers of the dear country of brotherly kindness. Oh, Jean, our hearts will break for him, but he's going out with shining banners of victory!"

Jean tried to smile, but she could not. Hilda's tears were streaming in a blinding rain. She caught unseeing at the outstretched hand and the two girls clung together in silent, rending grief. The age-old pang of woman lamenting her slain warrior was shared by each in that sunny tranquil garden while the birds sang and children laughed.

Jean was the first to speak. She dropped Hilda's hands and moved to the lounging chair again. "You'll have to rush, you know," she said, with almost her old drawl. "I've only got about five minutes. We're leaving on the six-forty for town."

Hilda, mopping her eyes, rushed. She ran to the library and wrote a few cheerful, loving lines, which she showed to Jean when she rejoined her on the lawn. Jean nodded, and took the note. At the door of her car she paused.

"He may not be so sick as we fear, you know," she said. "I'll cable the moment I see him. Uncle Will always makes a fuss. Don't tell your mother

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till she comes back. We'll be apt to come straight back, if Uncle Will's on time."

She was gone with a brisker wave than usual and Hilda turned to the long chair beneath the lindens. She simply could not go indoors just yet. She went over to the pantry window where Martha's head was seen and ordered a tray in the summer-house. Food seemed repulsive to her. Her throat was aching and her heart was very sore.

She lay back in the long chair staring up into the green bower of the lindens, and she thought of the old days with Jean and Hal. Many pictures came before her and always they showed Hal generous and brave, even when he teased and played tricks on them. The memories came thronging thickly and some made her smile. Gradually Jean's hopeful words worked their way into the fabric of her thoughts. She sat up with her face clearing. A belief in Hal's proverbial good luck came to her relief.

"I don't believe it's as bad as Mr. Weston thinks," she said with conviction. "Hal simply isn't going to die yet a while. Wonderful cures are made nowadays. And Mrs. MacAllister will have everything possible done for him. No, Hal isn't going to leave us, after all. When that cable comes, we'll see."

She went back to her solitary meal greatly com-

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forted by her prophecy and she ate every bit of the dainty little supper Martha had made for her. The book on Wall Decoration which she had left that morning in the summer-house caught her eye as John removed the tray, and she put an anxious question to him. It seemed that, in spite of her will to the contrary, this day was one of many shadows, some large like Jean's news and Page's illness, and some small like the memory of the account book up-stairs.

"Yes, miss, the packages come before you did," replied John. "I put 'em in the breakfast-room."

"Quite right, John," answered Hilda absently.

She went at once to the little room and gathered the amazingly small parcels in her arms. She knew exactly how large the bills were and the contrast between the length of the account at Harkin's and the weight of the packages made her sigh. After she had opened and admired the goods,—lovely soft terra cotta raw silks and tissues of the same faint color, she laid them in the bottom of her long chest. The bills she stuck in the second pigeonhole in her desk.

Then she sat down by the window and felt very, very lonely.

"And I'm all beset by promises," she thought ruefully. "I can't tell Mother about Hal. I



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can't tell anyone about the room. And I can't tell anyone about Page. I wish, oh, I wish ——”

She hesitated. It was flinging her good, clear judgment to the winds, but, somehow, that quarter of an hour with Jean had made her less sure of herself. She took a deep breath and then she spoke her wish.

“If Jack were only here, he'd understand,” she said. Even the dim memory of his criticism of her new friend did not trouble her. She felt that Jack would be a great comfort just now. “He doesn't fuss and talk,” she added. “He'd understand. ‘Faithful unto death,’—that's what Hal has been, too. Oh, why must everything be so twisted up all at once?”

She got up slowly. She knew she must find Page at once. “Or I'll be sorrier than ever,” she said, sighing. “If I'd only gone over sooner. She might not have gotten ill if she'd been here.”

She hurried down and got a store of jelly and fruit and flowers stowed in the car. And then she went back to the house for a couple of new magazines. The twilight was falling and she felt more lonely than ever. She would have asked John to go with her but she remembered it was his night out.

“I'll have to go it alone,” she said. “It serves me right. I wanted time to myself and now I've got it.”

## CHAPTER XII

### A FRIEND IN NEED

As she went toward the garage she remembered two letters for Jack which she had left forgotten since luncheon and she went back to redirect them for the evening mail. She knew he would not return for a few more days and might prolong his stay with the Williams' still further.

"He'll be back for the dance, though," she thought, as she put them again on the hall table for John. "Field Day, too, has too much charm for him to miss,—Janey Sloan has seen to that."

She went slowly across the lawn thinking she would be very glad when the end of the week should bring him. In her moments of intense loneliness she had known how good the sight of his queer friendly light eyes would be. The faces of the old crowd which she had renounced for the time being in her pursuit of self-interest rose before her in the twilight; good, friendly, sincere faces, all of them. Her heart warmed to them. And then for no reason in the world, in one of those involuntary mental flashes, the face of Mrs. Bradford, with its lovely,

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long-lashed eyes and perfect nose came vividly after the rest. Why was it that she did not seem to fit in with the others?

“She’s perfectly sweet, though,” she said aloud.

“Is that so?” cried a voice behind her.

She started and turned to face Jack. A little glad cry burst from her lips and she flung herself toward him with both arms wide. “Oh, it’s *you!*” she cried. “Oh, Jack!”

He grinned, kissed her ear in return for her ardent salute and then released her. He was looking very well and he was bursting with his news,—quite a contrast to his usual quiet self. He had quite forgotten their parting coolness and she was very glad to leave it to oblivion.

“Had a dandy time every minute,” he said, standing before her as she dropped into the low chair under the lindens. “Got a lot of fish, and no end of good swimming up there. We were in the water two and three hours every day. And fun!—well, after we went back to Williams’ bungalow we had the time of our sad old lives. Tennis matches and all sorts of stunts, and, say, Cousin Hilda, you ought to have seen me in the play we gave. I was the cutest ever. I had the girl’s part and I dressed up and acted like Janey Sloan, and I certainly was a peach.”

Hilda laughed at his earnestness. “You couldn’t



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have fooled me for one minute, Jackie," she replied. "I can spot a boy in girl's clothes every time. There's always something that gives them away."

"Is there?" retorted Jack, rather ruffled. "Well, there wasn't a single soul in the whole bunch that dreamed I wasn't a girl. Some of the fellows were as soft as the dickens, and that proves it. They thought I was a real one, and they aren't so stupid."

"But I shouldn't," Hilda insisted gaily. "I'd have known you. I always can recognize people through any disguise."

Jack flushed. "All right, you'll see," he prophesied with a nod. "I'll put it over you some day. Just wait." He nodded again firmly and then threw the subject aside with a gesture. "How's Bonaparte?" he asked in quite another tone. "Is he picking up much? Is he fit to drive yet?"

"He's creeping about very slowly, poor thing," replied Hilda regretfully. "He doesn't seem to get on. I wish you'd get John to feed him better ——"

Her last words were spoken to the empty air. Jack, leaving suitcases and fishing-rods on the grass, had disappeared in the direction of the barn. Hilda waited for his return, thinking to try to console him for the disappointment he must feel. Her thoughtfulness was wasted, however, for in a few

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minutes he came back with buoyant step, rubbing his hands in great satisfaction.

“He’s getting on finely, finely,” he cried. “He’s pretty thin yet, but he’s beginning to show his keep. John’s doing the right thing. And I tell you, Cousin Hilda, that horse has *blood!*”

He did not in the least care that Hilda smiled at his boasting. He took her teasing with great good humor, but he stuck to his rejoicings with the ardor of fifteen. “Talk about machines!” he said contemptuously. “Give me a horse,—a good-blooded horse ——”

“You’re quite welcome to him to-day,” laughed Hilda rising. “I’ve got to stick to the miserable machine, alas! I’m afraid Bonaparte isn’t quite up to a trip to the Hoffman Hospital. I’ll have to be off, too, for it’s getting on. I don’t suppose you could come down to riding in my poor little car, or I’d ask you to go along.”

Jack looked at the bunch of flowers that were already on the seat of the car, and at the small basket of fruit, and at the pile of magazines that Hilda had managed to collect from the library table. “Someone you know in hard luck?” he asked. “Not anyone ——”

“No, it isn’t Janey nor Esther Marie, nor yet Mrs. Bradford,” she told him lightly, recalling that he had not met Page after all. “But you can go

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along, if you don't mind waiting outside. I shan't be long, I fancy."

Jack accepted at once. He was keen on hospitals, he told her, and he'd like to see the operating room, if it wasn't in use. He might be a doctor some day and he liked to collect information. "Hospitals are dandy places," he said seriously. "I had a great time at the Wharton when my leg was broken last year. And then, too, you don't bother the people at home, you know. Is this Miss Carter the one at the Red Cross? I've seen her at the club once or twice."

Hilda explained that her Miss Carter was quite another, and that she did not know her very well,—that was all she felt safe in saying. There was no knowing what secrecy Page would demand of her. She would have even preferred leaving Jack in the car, but when they reached the hospital, he followed her into the entrance-hall and waited aside while she made her inquiries.

As she left the desk and turned to follow the orderly, he started forward, with an anxious look at her troubled face. "Anything up?" he questioned, but he understood by her decided shake of the head that he was not needed, and he went back to the desk to make his own inquiries as to the operating room and accident wards.

It was not any bad news of Page's condition that



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disturbed Hilda as she made her way along the spotless white corridors with their all-pervading odor of ether and drugs. It was the fact that she had been told that Page Carter was to be found in the Free Ward!

She had not thought of such a thing. Everyone she knew had been in pretty private rooms, and the possibility of the Free Ward had not even been dimly shadowed in her mind. Page Carter in the Free Ward!

When the door opened and she stood inside, looking down the long, bright room, she recoiled before the publicity of it,—the double row of small white beds, the low buzz of voices, the many faces turned curiously toward her. Page Carter, who had stood for dainty aloofness, for reserve and dignity, here among this motley assembly of human wretchedness! The sharp sting of the pity of it brought sudden tears to her eyes.

The nurse who came forward to meet her answered her low questions with punctilious exactness. Yes, there was a Miss Carter at the other end of the ward—in that last bed by the window. She was doing quite nicely. Had had a light case of pneumonia, but was quite on the mend. She was resting well, in fact was asleep now, and it might be better if her friend could call to-morrow. The hours for the Free Ward were limited and she

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could only have a few minutes with Miss Carter at any rate.

Hilda heard the words, but the thing that struck her into sudden silence was the fact that Page Carter was asleep, here, here, with all the restless murmurings of so many other sufferers about her.

She gave her card to the nurse and found her voice. "Please tell her I have brought her these and that I'll come again to-morrow," she said tremulously, handing the flowers and other things into the willing hands of the interested young woman.

She went back to the desk and got her information in an incredibly short time. There was a vacant room,—a small one with a big window,—on the western side of the hospital which could be had for four dollars a day. The semi-free wards, containing four beds, were three and a half. Hilda shuddered at the mention of four beds. And yet she hesitated.

"If I only knew how long Page would be ill," she thought in perplexity. "I wish I hadn't promised to be so secret. I'd have telephoned Mother ——"

The clerk was tapping her pencil on the book suggestively and Hilda knew she must come to some decision. "Can I reserve it while I think it over?" she asked with a troubled brow. "There

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are some things I have to consider." She wanted to count her resources more calmly than she could with the clerk's keen eye upon her. "I could telephone, perhaps."

"Before seven?" The clerk was brief and businesslike. "I go off duty at seven. I'll make the reservation until then." She jotted it down on her pad and Hilda felt herself dismissed.

Jack appeared as she gained the outer lobby. He glanced at her disturbed face but said nothing. He was really wonderfully considerate for a boy, Hilda thought, and she motioned to him to drive for her, so that she might be freer for her mental arithmetic.

Not a word was spoken in all the long way from the hospital to the open roads toward home. Hilda was counting over and over, with brain and fingers, the sum that she might use for the hire of that little room on the western side of the Hoffman.

When they were in the bowery shade of Lovers' Lane, Jack started at the sound of a subdued sniff. A look at his cousin told him what the sniff meant. Hilda was crying!

With one hand on the wheel he steered slowly along the secluded, lonely lane. He put the other on Hilda's shoulder with a very gentle touch. "Why, Cousin Hilda," he said, "what's happened? What is it?"



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Hilda could not speak. The kindness in his voice choked her. Then, suddenly, as she felt him patting her shoulder in that sedate paternal fashion, she melted into open weeping, with her head on his bony young shoulder. Between her sobs she managed to tell him all her difficulty.

"You see, I can't pay for the room," she gulped, after she had made matters clear. "Mother and I agreed that I'd have to drop out of the partnership if I didn't square my accounts. I'll simply have to draw on next month's allowance and drop out now. There isn't any other way."

He gave her a final comforting pat. "Well, you don't have to get the room, you know," he said slowly. "There's that way out of it."

She shook off his hand and blazed at him with hot scorn. "Don't have to?" she echoed. "Don't you know that I'd despise and detest myself forever if I left Page Carter in that Free Ward? I've broken my promise to her when I told you about her being sick there and having no money, but I'm not quite so low-down mean as to hesitate one single moment. I was only hopeless about having enough to see her through,—she may be ill longer than they think and I have other things to pay for."

She actually glared at him through her reddened lids as she vehemently added, "I'll hand Mother my resignation to the partnership to-morrow if I

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must, but I'll give every cent I have to keep Page out of that horrid Free Ward as long as I can."

He did not seem to resent her rage. He frowned thoughtfully, brought the car to a halt and rummaged in his pockets. He laid down a green two-dollar note on her knee. "That's the one you gave me for lunch. I didn't use it," he said. On this he laid two yellow-backed bills. "That's what was left after I paid for my birthday present." He went on absently, "Aunt Alice sent a bigger check than I needed." On top of these he put his last offering,—an unused railway ticket from Coon Lake. "That's good for four bucks," he said, nodding at it. "Great luck I didn't have to use it, isn't it? Bought it and then got brought all the way in Steven's car. That'll fix one day, anyway."

"But—but ——" began Hilda weakly.

He silenced her with a gesture. "You take it now and pay me back next,—next year, or any old time when you're making money for yourself," he said firmly. "I've got some change and I'll manage all right. It won't be long till the eighteenth, and your next bunch of cash will fix things shipshape. You shan't resign from that Lady House Furnishers just yet, believe me."

Hilda could not refuse the sorely needed money, but she made her terms of acceptance very clear, in spite of her gratitude.

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“I’ll only take what I positively must have,” she said firmly. “I’ll pay you back when my allowance comes in, or when,—well, when some other money is paid me. I can’t let you spend your money on my mistakes,” and then, having told him so much, she explained that she had intended inviting Page to Grey Cot but had been too busy. “And so she got ill and you have to deny yourself to help me. It’s a loan, Jack, remember that.”

“All right,” he replied easily. “I’ve got too much anyway. I’m glad to let it work. I think ——”

“And while we’re talking about things,” she broke in impulsively, “I want to tell you that I am perfectly delighted to have you home again. I don’t care how many times you say, ‘Punk,’ I’ll never fuss with you again. Mother was right ——”

He interrupted her with a chuckle. “I knew you didn’t care, really,” he remarked comfortably. “Let’s can all that stuff and step on the gas for home and ’phone. That beauty at the Hoffman might take a notion to rent Miss Carter’s room to someone else.”

Hilda cuddled down in the low seat, entirely happy in her relief. It was very good to have someone,—someone who understood,—take the wheel. The friendly silence made her very comfortable. She and Jack did not have to talk to



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each other now. They were real comrades at last. Hilda was rather glad she had never written her first opinion of Jack to her mother.

As they turned the curve past Mullen's Pond, Jack nodded to the dim mass of buildings and trees of The Pines. "She's home, too," he remarked casually. "Saw them on the road as I came along. I'd know her red head anywhere."

Hilda laughed at his tone. "You'd like her all right if you'd condescend to get acquainted with her," she said. "She's really a sensible, nice little thing. She's had her own way a lot, of course, and she seems rather peppery at times. But she's clever and generous and ——"

"Hm-m, quite so," broke in Jack, in his most bored tone. "No doubt she's a wonder,—only I can't see it yet. Janey Sloan is more the style I like, and your Esther Marie girl can't ever hope to grow up like her, I believe. Here's a good open stretch. Watch me step on it."

As they flew along the smooth roadway he flung one last word to Hilda as the trees and stables of Grey Cot flashed into view.

"You tell that Hoffman fairy that we'll take the room for as long as Miss Carter needs it. I'll help you out as far as you like, and we won't gab any more about that end of it," he said. "Here we are," he ended, as they whirled the last corner.

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“Step lively, please, Miss Carter’s waiting, you know.”

Hilda ran in to the telephone with all her forebodings gone. She felt that not only Page and the partnership were being saved, but that, in some indefinite way, the old trio, Jean and Hal and herself, was being cemented into more lasting unity. She took up the receiver with a sigh of content.

“Pelham 344, please,” she called.

After a little interval she got the clerk, and made herself known.

“We’ll take that room for Miss Carter,” she said clearly. “Please have her moved in as soon as possible. I’ll be down in the morning to see about paying.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### CAPTAIN MULFORD'S MISTAKE

“WELL, isn't this better than that horrid old ward down-stairs?”

Hilda's eyes were dancing and her voice rang with pleasure as she put the question. She looked in from the threshold of the little room at Page in the fresh white bed and she fairly beamed with satisfaction.

“This suits you better than that hodge-podge of nations down-stairs,” she rippled. “It's small, but it's cool and bright. You look perfectly sweet with your hair that way, Page,—it makes you look like a little girl. I've heard that you are lots better, so I shan't bore you with questions. I'll get a vase for these flowers and then I'll come in for a few minutes, if you'll promise not to talk.”

She was thankful as she saw the happy look on Page's white face that she had acted promptly. She hurried back with the glass vase from the dispensary, and while she arranged the fresh flowers, she talked softly of the things she knew Page wanted to hear.



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“ I read an article on Rio Janeiro last week, and it says it's the most beautiful city in South America,” she said. “ You'll love it when you go down there to live with Carter. And I'll come visit you, and we'll have the most wonderful times. When you get well enough I'll bring the book over for you to see. I think you ought to study Spanish, too. Everyone who goes to South America does. We'll have a class for beginners out at Grey Cot when Carter's one of the firm,—of course, he can't have you go down right off ——”

Page lay very still with the most peaceful expression on her thin face. She smiled but did not attempt to speak. Her face lighted from time to time and later, when the nurse came softly to the half-open door with a glass of orange juice for the patient and a significant look for Hilda, Page's big eyes showed her regret quite as clearly as she could have spoken it.

Hilda was quick to note the look. “ Never mind, I'll be over again soon,” she said brightly as she said good-bye. “ I can come to see you here any time I choose, you know,—it's not like that horrid,—well, I won't mention that place again, but you know where I mean. Good-bye and brace up; the best is yet to come!”

She told Jack of Page's comfortable state as soon as she met him at the tennis courts of the club,

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where she stopped to pick him up. "I believe she'll get well quickly now," she said hopefully. "Perhaps we won't have to spend much after all."

Jack chuckled and displayed a dollar in a rather grimy palm. "Doesn't matter if we have to blow in our whole fortune,—I've struck pay-dirt and you needn't worry, little one," he said with a patronizing air. "I'm on the way to cut out old Rockefeller. I made that this morning."

"You're not caddying at the club at your age?" cried Hilda in quick alarm. She stopped at the expression of compassion on his face. "Oh, no, of course you're not," she amended hastily. "You couldn't be playing if you were a caddy. What are you doing then?"

"Something that is perfectly honest and strictly private," he told her with an impish grin. "You needn't think you can wheedle it out of me and then grab the job yourself, for I'm not going to tell. It's all right, strictly all right, and that's all you need know about it."

Hilda saw he was not to be moved and she meekly gave up, remembering her experience in regard to the telegram. Nevertheless, she kept an eye on his movements for the rest of the day, as far as she was able. That she did not discover the slightest clue only added to her curiosity. She felt

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that sooner or later she must unravel the mild mystery of Jack's source of income.

She was surprised to see Captain Mulford's car before the house and Captain Mulford himself was lounging in the easy-chair under the trees when they drove in. He sprang up with almost theatrical grace to help Hilda out of the car and his salutations were fervid and prolonged. That is, as far as Hilda was concerned. He barely noticed Jack's existence with a cool nod. It was evident he had no taste for boys.

"I've just run up to see if we can't get you to come down for a dance on Friday," he said, settling himself very near to Hilda's chair, as Jack, with his tongue in his cheek, left them. "We officers are getting it up and it promises to be quite a nice little thing. Mrs. Bradford will chaperone you and we'll have a supper in the private dining-room at the Carlton afterward,—the fellows all have leave for the night."

Hilda shook her head with much regret. "Oh, I'd love to, but it's quite impossible," she replied. "Jack and I are going with the Sloans to the Club Field Day and a supper afterward at Mrs. Morton's. We've had the engagement for ages."

"All the more reason for cutting it," he returned lightly. "Hang-overs are apt to be stale affairs. You can make up some good excuse,—your great-



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grandmother is ill or you've mislaid your best hat,—and they'll never know the difference, since your mother isn't home."

Hilda was silent. She had not the faintest intention of crying off from her engagement with Janey, but the prospect of the dance in the pretty new hotel near the camp and of the delights of unlimited partners to choose from, made her refusal slow in coming.

The captain misunderstood her silence, and he bent nearer. "Oh, come, be a sport," he urged. "We can't do without you, you know. It's no use to hang back. We'll fix it up somehow. No one but Potts and Mrs. Bradford need know who you are,—the rest will be all strangers to you. Do say you'll come."

"Please don't keep on asking me," she replied, her cheeks aflame and her eyes clouded. "I'd hate to have to cheat or,—it's no use thinking of it, for I'm going to Field Day and Mrs. Morton's supper. I wouldn't break my engagement with the Sloans for the most delightful affair in the world."

The captain took her rebuff very coolly. He was evidently not an amateur in matters of this sort. He waited until she had ended and then he drew his chair nearer again. He spoke in a low, soothing tone as though to a wilful child.

"You mustn't fly off like that, you know," he

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murmured gently. "Second thoughts are always best, aren't they? Let's talk it over sociably and see if we can't hit it off somehow."

His handsome, smiling face was suddenly hateful to her. She wondered why she had ever thought him agreeable at the Ardsmore that afternoon. She rose. "I don't want to go to your dance," she said, flinging all her scorn for his deceit into each crisp word. "I don't have to make secrets of the parties I go to. And I hate people who do. I suppose I have to thank you for your invitation, but I shan't ever go to any dance with you anywhere, thank you. And I wish you a very good afternoon."

She held herself very stiff as she pronounced these crushing words. She did not look at him for fear his discomfiture might make her regret them.

He arose easily and took up his hat deliberately. "That sounds as though you were ready to dispense with my society for a while," he returned with unruffled good nature, still speaking as though to a naughty child. "Sorry you feel so keen about choking me off. Mrs. Bradford seemed to think you'd be apt to manage the dance, but I suppose I've been a bit awkward. Better luck next time. You don't care to shake hands? No? Well, just as you wish."

She looked at him without fear of embarrassing

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him now, but her indignant gaze had no effect upon his good nature.

“ You won’t reconsider the matter? ” he paused to ask, adjusting his collar and straightening his belt with cheerful precision.

“ I shall never think of it again,” she retorted quickly. She felt she had chosen an unfortunate reply, for his smile gave her to understand that he knew she would think of it many times, and she had to confess that he was right, although they might not agree as to how she would think of it.

He left with a graceful bow and strode away, showing by the set of his shoulders that he knew she was looking after him and that he was well worth looking at. Hilda hated him more than ever for that triumphant exit, for it put her somehow in the wrong. It made her seem more than ever the petulant child that he had assumed her to be. And yet she knew beyond a shadow of doubt that she was entirely right.

“ He’s perfectly horrid! ” she cried, half aloud, with a little impotent stamp of her foot. “ And I don’t believe Mrs. Bradford knew a thing about it. I’m sure he made that all up, the deceitful —— ”

“ *Hul-lo*, what’s up—private theatricals? ” called a familiar voice.

Hilda started and turned a burning red. She felt that Leslie must have seen the Captain’s tri-



## *CAPTAIN MULFORD'S MISTAKE*

umphant exit, and perhaps more. She was so confused that she forgot to be surprised at his unexpected appearance at the palings of the garden fence beyond the summer-house.

“W-w-when did you get here?” she faltered.  
“H-how long have you been there?”

“At the particular spot where I am now located? Just this very second of time,” Leslie replied readily. “What’s up?”

His face was so sincere that Hilda had to take his protests as genuine and believe that he had not seen the Captain’s departure but had popped his head over the palings only at the moment of her outburst after the unwelcome guest had gone. She drew a long breath of relief and became herself again.

“Come on in and report,” she invited, only too happy to forget the unpleasant incident in Leslie’s account of his visit to Lawrence Meade of which Jack had told her. Leslie always brought such delicious tales of the haps and mishaps of his journeyings. “Is Lawrence going to get off next month for the wedding?”

Leslie vaulted the palings and came over to the low chair. “He’s all right,” he replied cheerfully. “He’s got to run down to Rio for a bit of business for his dad before he gets loose from the New York office, but he’ll be here for the great event on the

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

sixteenth. Wild horses couldn't keep him away. Funny, isn't it, how crazy he is about Betty? He's known her all his life, too."

Hilda merely nodded. She was still fuming inwardly over Captain Mulford's impertinence and she wanted to rush to talk with Mrs. Bradford over the telephone. She wondered why Leslie had come.

"I just ran over to tell you that Mrs. Chester is going to chaperone us for the dance," he said as though in answer to her thought. "Mrs. Sloan has gone to Maine and she's stopping with Janey until her mother gets back. We'll drop in for you and your kid cousin about eight-thirty. By the way, that youngster is a crackerjack at tennis. We're wishing he was a member, so he could play the next matches."

Hilda had no chance to reply. Jack's melodious whistle sounded from the stable and he came flying over the grass, a warm welcome for Leslie in his face and voice. He was quite a different Jack from the one who had retired before Captain Mulford.

"Want to see a horse?" he asked Leslie gleefully. "I tell you, you'd never know Bonaparte for the same bag of bones I bought two weeks ago. He's ——"

"He's just as bony as ever, Leslie,—don't let him raise your hopes," laughed Hilda. "He's a perfect skeleton, even with his cover on."

## *CAPTAIN MULFORD'S MISTAKE*

Jack wagged his head loftily. "Come on, both of you," he commanded. "We'll see who's right."

They started, but John halted Hilda before she had gone two steps. His "You are wanted on the 'phone, Miss Hilda," turned her steps toward the house and she went swiftly, wondering who it might be.

She was smiling a little as she took up the receiver. All the tempest of revolt and anger that had so suddenly and unexpectedly swept over her in those few minutes with Captain Mulford had passed. The sight of Leslie with his comfortable habits of comradeship; of Jack whose whimsical manners hid so true a heart; the thought of Betty and Jim and Lawrence, had somehow slipped her mind back into its old grooves of good-will and kindly belief in the world about her.

It was Mrs. Bradford's voice, and Hilda gave a little exclamation of pleasure. Her friend seldom called her. The warm thrill that filled her at the sound of the soft, melodious voice died suddenly, however, at the realization of what the voice was saying. Mrs. Bradford was speaking of the proposed dance.

"I'm quite ready to play fairy-godmother, my dear,—pumpkin coach and all," the soft voice rippled. "I can't promise you an invisible cloak but I think we can arrange it so that your friends' feel-



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ings are not hurt by any knowledge of why you couldn't keep your engagement with them."

Something rose in Hilda's throat, blocking speech for a moment, and the soft voice went on, "Captain Mulford tells me that you feel rather uncertain, on account of an old engagement, but I'm sure we can arrange that safely, since you would like to go with us."

It was so plain now to Hilda that the Captain had gone straight to Mrs. Bradford with his false reports, deliberately deceiving that sincere, good friend, that she found her voice in a rush of words.

"Indeed, I can't go," she said emphatically. "Captain Mulford has entirely deceived you. I told him I could not and would not go, and he understood it quite plainly. If he has given you the idea that I was hesitating about it, he has deliberately misrepresented what I said to him. I can't think how he could have made such a stupid blunder."

There was the briefest silence, as though a long breath were being taken, and then the soft voice came again, "Oh, my dear, how unfortunate that I should not have known just how the matter stood. Of course, I should never have dreamed of urging you to break a real engagement. Captain Mulford's feelings, his desire to have you at the dance,

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—which I may say is really being gotten up for you,—have carried him quite away, it seems.”

The slight pause, in which Hilda might have had a chance to change her mind, passed and Mrs. Bradford's voice went on evenly, “Pray don't think any more about it, my dear. It has been a foolish mistake, but nothing more. Poor Archie is already punished for his presumption in hoping his dance would be the superior attraction, and I am in sack-cloth and ashes over my mistaken offer to play god-mother. You'll forgive us both, I am sure. And don't forget that you are to take me to the Conference to-morrow. Good-bye and good fortune until then!”

Hilda had no chance for further explanation or regret, for the receiver at the other end was hung up and her eager words were wasted.

“She hasn't an idea of how horrid Captain Mulford can be,—she's too good,” she thought as she too hung up and sat with her chin in her hand, pondering. “I don't know whether I had better tell her about how abominably he behaved, or not. I wish Mother were home so I could ask her about it. She really ought to have her eyes opened ——”

She sat for some time, thinking seriously, and then she sighed as she rose. “Well, anyway,” she said rather wistfully, “it all makes me hate deceit and underhand dealings more than ever. I'd rather

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be straightforward than—than get the best thing in the world by cheating.”

When she saw Mrs. Bradford the next day, her friend was so sweetly concerned about the mistake she had made that Hilda had not the heart to wound her with a detailed account of Captain Mulford's offending words. She was too glad to find her divinity flawless to quibble over a mere trifle like the Captain's offensiveness. She made up for her dismissal of Mrs. Bradford's friend by being more devoted to Mrs. Bradford, if that were possible.

She drove her to the Conference of Welfare Workers and came for her afterward. When she left her at the Ardsmore, she stopped at Harkin's and got the rug she had been hesitating about yesterday. She felt that in buying it on credit for Mrs. Bradford, she was showing more confidence in her admired friend.

At the hospital she had a good report of Page who was asleep and so not to be seen. She drove home in a contented frame of mind. Her mother's last letter was in her pocket, Mr. Dalton had again praised her drawing for the Hampton Row room, Esther Marie had brought her a rare little jug for her own blue bedroom and she simply knew that Jean's cablegram would be good news.

She drove slowly along by an unaccustomed road, passing rows of pretty houses with smooth lawns



## *CAPTAIN MULFORD'S MISTAKE*

and neat terraces, where the click of pruning shears and the whirr of lawn-mowers was to be heard. It seemed that this was the favorite clean-up day for this neighborhood. At one end of the row a youth in shirt-waist and white trousers was making the grass fly before his speeding mower. Something in his motions caught Hilda's eye and she almost threw on the emergency brake in her surprise.

It was Jack!

Strange to say, he did not see her as she flew past. His head was bent and his eyes fixed on the other end of the lawn. He moved with the speed of a motor and was gone behind the house while Hilda flew past.

"So that's how he makes his money," she thought with a throb of admiration for the energy displayed. Pushing a lawn-mower on a warm morning was the last thing she would have thought of for leisurely Jack. "Bless his heart, he's the real thing, after all. Mother knew him better than I did, of course."

At the luncheon table she tried to draw him out in regard to his accumulating income, but he evaded her skilfully. He had been busy and it was mighty hot over the other side of town, he said, and what did she think of asking that Page girl to come to Grey Cot as soon as they'd let her out of the hospital? "I'd be home a lot, and I know about sick

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people, you see, and we could manage her between us, so Martha couldn't kick," he ended seriously.

Hilda wanted to kiss him but she merely said she'd think about it. To herself she said, "He thought of that because he's afraid his money won't cover Page's expenses if she stays there long and he's determined I shan't be disappointed about the Partnership."

A warm wave of feeling swept over her as she watched his slim figure racing to catch up with John who was going barnward.

"You are perfectly fine, Jackie boy, though you don't like to let anyone know it," she said firmly, "but other people are not quite such selfish beasts as they used to be. They're going to try to be honest, at any rate. That's sure and certain!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE DANCE AT THE CLUB

“ PHWEE-OOO-WEEE! ”

Leslie's whistle brought Hilda to her feet.

She had not heard the automobile stop outside, but the familiar whistled warning of Leslie's approach brought her back to the present with a joyful start. She jumped up, gathering her cloak about her and hurried into the hall. Through the glass side-lights of the wide door she could see Leslie coming up the steps.

“ I'm all ready,” she cried as she flung open the door. “ I'll call Jack and we'll be with you in a jiffy. He hasn't come down yet.”

It was the night of the dance, a cool crisp night that promised perfect comfort on the crowded dancing floor,—and Hilda's pulses were dancing to a tune of happy expectancy. She had on her becoming pink chiffon with the new silver panel, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shining. She had quite forgotten her discontent at having a mere civilian as an escort and she beamed on Leslie with pretty welcome, as she sounded the Japanese gong by the stairs.



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"I told him I'd ring when you came," she said, adding gaily, "You look awfully well in that new rig, Leslie. I'm glad it's formal to-night, for those clothes help me to bear up under being denied a soldier uniform."

Leslie undoubtedly did look wonderfully well. The white expanse under his well-cut chin was quite as becoming to him as Hilda's fluffy draperies were to her. And he liked to be told. It made him unusually communicative. "You look like a regular peach yourself," he responded with open admiration. "Old Bill Draper will be sore on me for putting him off with Janey but he'll have to stand it. I'm going to have the first two dances,—remember that."

He held one hand behind him and he now brought out a lovely little corsage bouquet of pale pink sweet peas, Hilda's favorite flower. "Will these match all right?" he asked.

She took them with pleasure and held them against her dress. "They're perfect," she said radiantly. "They fit in beautifully at this knot in my girdle."

Jack came down at that moment, and, because they were too much pleased with themselves to notice or because of the slight coolness of the evening, neither of them commented on the fact that his light overcoat was buttoned to the chin.

## *THE DANCE AT THE CLUB*

They found Mrs. Chester's big car in front of the house with Janey beside her on the back seat and the imposing figure of Lieutenant Draper standing very upright on the driveway. Hilda wished, as the introductions were made and she heard the Lieutenant's firm tones, that the moon had risen so that she might have a good view of him. She could not manage more than a glimpse as he got in, but that glimpse was very attractive. He was tall, erect and extremely dignified.

"Just Janey's luck to get the best looking man in the crowd," she thought with a fleeting half-amused regret. "I suppose I shall have to dance with civilians all the evening."

These forebodings did not damp her spirits in the least, however, and they were a very gay party on the short road to the club. Hilda noticed that both the Lieutenant and Jack, who were on the little seats in the middle of the car, craned their heads constantly toward the back seat that held Janey, but she was quite content with even that limited view of their backs. The mounting sense of joys to come made her heart throb happily and her laugh ripple out at every slight opportunity.

Jack only spoke to her once. It was when they were passing The Pines and someone had spoken of Mr. Skelton's fine collection of prints which was being shown in the Norton Library that week.

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Jack touched Hilda's elbow, motioning to a figure which was coming from the back of the house toward the servants' entrance on the highway. "There's your precious spitfire," he whispered. "Out collecting, I guess. Seems to run in the family."

Hilda screwed her eyes to peer through the starlight. "She'd never be out alone at this time of the night," she retorted under her breath. "They draw the line at that." She spoke positively for she recalled Esther Marie having complained only that afternoon of the strictness which Miss DuBois insisted on in the matter of evening outings. "She never goes anywhere without a maid, and a man to take care of them both."

Jack was not convinced. "I know the way she struts along and it's her, all right," he insisted ungrammatically but firmly.

It was only a momentary glimpse they had as they sped past and Hilda was so sure of her own superior knowledge that she paid little heed to Jack's statement. There were far more inviting topics than a rambling kitchen maid, as she knew it to be, and by the time they had reached the club she had forgotten the incident entirely.

The club was a scene of delightful gaiety. Flower-decked and softly illuminated, it was already crowded. Everyone had arrived early, and



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the rooms were a-flutter with airy gowns, pretty faces and soft laughter.

Hilda was too much interested in their arrival to waste time lingering on the steps of the club-house. She followed Mrs. Chester and Janey to the dressing-rooms with a delightful sense of expectancy. "How lovely everything looks," she said to Janey as they shook out their filmy draperies and adjusted their hair before the long mirrors.

"Doesn't it?" responded Janey, with one eye on the hall where their escorts were already waiting. "Lieutenant Draper said he'd never seen a prettier club-house."

Hilda smiled and went out to meet Leslie with a little laugh of sheer happiness. The pink-and-silver chiffon, with its new panel, looked quite as well as she had hoped. The music was sounding from the dancing-room above and it was playing a favorite waltz.

She did not see Jack anywhere. Another young man was waiting with Leslie and the Lieutenant. Janey held out her hand to him graciously. "Oh, Mr. Hastings ——" she began, when Hilda broke in on her with a little cry of amazement.

"Jack, is it really you?" she asked, staring at the correct figure in evening dress. "Where did you ——"

He cut her short. "Where did I come from?"

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he interposed, with a suggestive glance at her. "Why, I was in the car with you, of course. You're forgetting everything, aren't you? Those flowers Leslie gave you must be in the machine yet."

It was true, she had forgotten Leslie's gift. A burst of teasing laughter came from the others and the tables were turned on her. Jack got to the car before Leslie, and he was back in a moment, holding them out to her. "Keep your wits about you, young lady, and don't ask foolish questions next time," he said with a meaning grin as he put them into her hands.

She accepted the flowers with a grateful look. "You look wonderfully well in your best clothes," she said under her breath. "Why didn't you show yourself off at home before we started?"

He gave her a queer look and turned away to Janey. "Remember, I'm to have the second dance, Miss Sloan," he said earnestly. Janey bubbled up at him in her usual fashion, but she turned to Lieutenant Draper as they started up the wide stairs, and she did not turn her head in Jack's direction again.

Hilda soon forgot Jack's new clothes, however, for as they crossed the smooth floor of the dancing-room Jim Yarrow hailed her. "The wandering sheep has returned to the fold, I see," he said. "Bring her over to our crowd after your dance,

## *THE DANCE AT THE CLUB*

Les,—we'll all be there on the first balcony. Give me a sight of that program, Miss. I want to see that my name's there as often as it ought to be."

Hilda laughed as she displayed her card. She was not worried about any lack of partners. Jim made a wry mouth as he saw the full list. "My handsome initials are there all right but you've got too many others. I'm going to tell your mother on you if you split dances with more than two, you know," he warned her, as he handed it back. "Be sure to come over to the balcony soon as this dance is over."

The floor was perfect, and Leslie knew how to dance. Hilda was sorry when the music ceased. It had been more than a month since she had danced and she longed for more. But when they reached the balcony she found the old crowd, as Jim had said, ready to welcome the wandering sheep. All talked at once, all asked questions nobody troubled to answer, all laughed together at everything that was said. It was exactly like old times save for the absence of Jean and Hal. Hilda thought with a little inward ripple, "It's better than the hermit's life, after all."

She said so to Jack when he came for his dance. "Of course, one gets more work done alone but I believe it's all right to have some fun in between, after all. It makes one feel so good."



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

He nodded as he steered her through the crowd of dancers. "Them's my sentiments," he replied. "All work and no play ——" he broke off to ask casually, "Did you know that Janey Sloan had her card made up over two weeks ago? She's only giving me the third splits. She's dancing most of the time with that soldier of hers."

Hilda's merriment did not seem to soothe him and after he left her with her next partner she saw no more of him for an hour or more.

One of the dressing-room maids came toward her just as she had ended a waltz with a very nice-looking Mr. Brooks, who had been introduced by Mrs. Chester. They were at the wide entrance of the ballroom and about to make their way to the balcony in search of cool air, and Hilda paused in surprise at the girl's words.

"A telephone call for me?" she asked incredulously.

She followed the maid to the dressing-room on the first floor wondering who could want her at this time and place. She took up the receiver with the ring of the waltz music still in her ears and the sounds of gay voices and many rhythmic feet overhead, for the encore dance was beginning. She could hardly understand who it was at first.

"Miss Skelton's maid?" she echoed blankly. "And you say you are at Smith's drug store?"

## *THE DANCE AT THE CLUB*

It took some little time to understand.

Annie, the quiet rather elderly person, who—after Miss DuBois—was responsible for Esther Marie's clothing and conduct, had discovered that about an hour earlier her charge had taken herself off without a word to anyone, and, although Annie had searched the house and grounds secretly, but thoroughly, not a trace of the impetuous Miss Skelton had been found.

Fearful of alarming the gentle Miss DuBois by announcing the absence of Esther Marie, Annie had gone hastily over to Grey Cot in the hope of finding her young lady there. "She's taken such a fancy to you, Miss Hilda, that I thought she might have stolen off for a call on you,—just for a lark, as you might say," Annie explained. "And when I found she hadn't been there, I thought perhaps you might have some notion of where she was."

Hilda answered that she hadn't the faintest idea, and then she halted,—the memory of Jack's words coming to her. "Wait a while, Annie," she amended in a whirl of indecision as to what she should do. "Perhaps—well,—I'll come over to Smith's in a moment. I don't know where she is, but I'll risk a guess."

She hung up with a click and jumped to her feet. Her thoughts were in chaos, but she meant to get Leslie to take her over to Smith's and then she

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would follow the wild-geese chase that her memory led her. Betty Yarrow, coming in to repair a tear in her chiffon dress hem, changed her plans in a twinkling.

“See here, Betts, I want your little car for a moment,” she said. “I won’t be long. I’ve got to go off just for a few minutes on a particular errand.”

Betty, intent on the maid’s skilful manipulation of the rent, merely nodded. Hilda’s ability with cars was too well established to let her hesitate for the fraction of a second. She did not even ask where the errand was, for the music was calling and Betty was engaged for that dance to a Mr. Fred Johnson, a close friend of Lawrence’s who was to give her the latest word about her betrothed.

Hilda flung her cloak about her and made her way through the fringe of late arrivals without being stopped. She was in the car and at the corner drug store in a jiffy and had Annie in beside her before that worthy soul could begin to ask the first question.

“I don’t know that we’ll find her there,” breathed Hilda steering swiftly through the dim starlight. “But I’m taking the chance. She spoke to-day of night being the best time to get that particular water-snake she wanted. And my cousin was positive he saw her at the back entrance. If





THE GOOD PRIEST GAVE MANY INTERESTING ACCOUNTS.



## *THE DANCE AT THE CLUB*

she were going to Mullen's Pond, she'd take that way, of course."

Annie groaned. "Mullen's Pond!" she echoed dismally. "Mullen's Pond! My gracious goodness!"

They were on the road beside the screening thicket that bordered the pond before her lamentation had died in her throat, and Hilda was out of the car peering through the tangle of drooping leaves in another instant.

For a moment all was absolute silence.

Then, a crackling of branches, a splashing of water came to them, made loud to their strained ears by the fear that rose swiftly.

"She's out on the pond, if it's she," said Hilda. "It's too dark to see, though. Is there a boat there? I don't remember any."

"Not a single boat——" began Annie, when a cry rang out,—a cry that froze the blood in their veins, for it was a cry for help!

Someone was struggling in the water over there in the dim spaces behind the willows. And as the cry rang out they recognized the voice.

It was Esther Marie, and she was drowning.

The world spun around for Hilda in that moment of recognition. A sick sense of swift tragedy smote her and she swayed, clutching the side of the car for support. A horrible faintness swept over her,



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and she heard Annie's low sob of horror as coming from a great distance.

The cry sounded again, and now it had a gurgling note that was terrible,—the inarticulate cry of the drowning.

Esther Marie was going down for the last time!

## CHAPTER XV

### FROM A WATERY GRAVE

HILDA never knew how she did it.

She was in the car and crashing through the fringe of undergrowth toward the water's edge before Annie had time to get out. She pointed the powerful headlights toward the spot whence the cry had come, and she halted the car on the very verge of the pond,—the emergency brakes screaming unheeded.

She caught the white gleam of an arm just beyond the spot where she had halted and where she knew the water, running to the dam-breast, to be the deepest. Without clearly knowing what she did, she kicked off her silver slippers and ran to the center of the dam-breast, a few paces ahead, calling as she ran.

Just as she dived she remembered with a detached sense of satisfaction that her thin chiffon-cloth gown and delicate silk underskirts would be no more obstruction to her movements than the ordinary bathing suit. Then she put her whole energies into the overhand stroke and rose quickly at the churning spot where Esther Marie was going down.

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The light from the machine's lamps shone across the disturbed waters, showing her plainly the dim mass of tree-branches above her. Her weeks of deep-sea bathing from the yacht stood her in good stead. She caught at the swirling figure, missed it and reached again, catching it securely by the long floating hair, and rose swiftly to the surface, swimming on her back and towing the now unconscious girl behind her.

It was only a few strokes to the dam-breast where Annie waited, and Hilda seized the heavy link of chain that hung from the post, holding on there with one hand while she brought the unconscious body of Esther Marie close to the wooden wall.

"Take her up!" she gasped. "Get her by the skirts and I'll push!"

Annie had her on the ground in a moment and Hilda climbed out dripping to stoop anxiously over the prostrate figure. There was not a quiver of an eyelash nor the faintest show of life in the wet limp form. All of Hilda's confidence and courage dropped from her as she looked.

"Oh, she's dead, after all!" she cried in despair, dropping on her knees to seize one lifeless hand.

But Annie brushed her aside.

"We'll get home as quick as we can," she said briefly, and stooping, took the inert Esther Marie in her arms and walked away toward the automo-



## *FROM A WATERY GRAVE*

bile. It was remarkable how strong she seemed and how quickly she walked.

Hilda remembered the rugs under the seat and she brought them out, throwing one over Esther Marie's wet form as Annie lifted it into the car. She was too excited to think of herself and the distance to *The Pines* was mercifully short. They were at the back entrance of the house in less than two minutes, and in two more, Annie had Esther Marie across a stool before the kitchen fire, rolling her energetically from side to side, while a mob of excited servants crowded around with eager questions and comments and even some tears, for Esther Marie was a favorite with all.

Miss DuBois came quietly as they watched Annie's efforts with straining eyes and chilling hearts,—Esther Marie looked so dead with her big eyes half closed and her mouth sagging,—and the gentle lady spoke with great kindness, even in the midst of her affliction.

“My dear, you will get cold if you do not change,” she said softly. “The doctor is already on his way and will soon be here. Will you not go up and remove your wet clothing? Jennie will show you to a bathroom and give you a dry bath-robe or ——”

She was interrupted by the doctor's arrival, who, as he afterward confessed, had shattered the speed

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limits in his anxiety; and she forgot Hilda entirely in watching the deft treatment under his skilled hands. So Hilda remained, watching, too, and trembling very much,—first, for fear that he might not be successful and then for joy at the results of his labor.

Esther Marie having been treated very successfully, first by Annie and further by the doctor's efforts, came slowly back to life. She raised her eyelids indifferently, groaned and shivered, became unconscious for a moment, and then returned to a full understanding of where she was. A perfectly beatific smile parted her lips and she said in a feeble voice:

“ Oh, it's so nice to be here!”

It was evident that drowning had not been for her the delightful sensation that it is reported to be by some people.

That was all that Hilda saw of her then. Miss DuBois laid hands upon her and sent her off attended by the excited Jennie, whose questions brought from Hilda an account of what she could recall of the accident, and whose eyes grew round with admiration when she understood that it was Hilda who had rescued her young mistress. In the hurry and distraction no one had made this clear.

Jennie, taking the soaked draperies to be dried, left her in a well-appointed bathroom with a plen-

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tiful supply of warm towels and a padded silk bathrobe and hurried off, promising to return at once with the latest report of the invalid.

The door had no sooner closed on the maid when Hilda, in the midst of the grateful warmth, had a flashing memory of the club with its lights and music, its laughter and fragrance. She had forgotten all about the dance but it rushed back on her in the moment of relief and she gave an exclamation of annoyance.

“I ought to have gone straight home instead of coming up here to change,” she said. “I could have gotten into another dress and gone back before they missed me. How stupid of me to forget!”

She put her finger on the push and rang repeatedly for Jennie, but it was Miss DuBois herself who knocked at the door.

She looked relieved to see Hilda in the dry bathrobe. “Oh, my dear, we are so grateful to you,” she exclaimed before Hilda could speak. “Esther Marie is quite restored and Annie has told us all about it. She is waiting very impatiently to thank you and I hope you will come right over to her room. She is quite comfortable now, and rather indignant that she is obliged to stay in bed,” she added with a little nervous laugh.

Hilda could not refuse so kindly a demand, and she followed Miss DuBois to the room across the



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hall where the rescued Esther Marie was waiting her. But she said quite firmly before they had reached the door, "I must have my things at once, please, Miss DuBois, for I shall have to go home immediately."

Miss DuBois listened to her explanation of how she had left the club in such a hasty manner and her wish to rejoin her friends as soon as possible. She sympathized entirely with Hilda's feelings, but she seemed reluctant to part with her so soon. It was evident that she felt that such a hasty exit bordered on inhospitality. And hospitality was Miss DuBois' strongest passion,—after Esther Marie.

As she hesitated to find the right words to urge a slight delay, Jennie appeared and, seeing them, came toward them, asking if they had not rung. "Beulah the laundress says she can have your things for you as good as new by the time your hair is dry, Miss Hare," she said. "I will bring an oil stove wherever you wish,—there being no gas in this house."

Miss DuBois nodded. "Ah, yes; that will be well, Jennie," she said. "Bring it in to Miss Esther Marie's room at once. And tell Mary to send up the hot lemonade there, too." To Hilda she added, "Yes, you must dry your hair and that takes time. I must have had that fact at the back

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of my mind when I took it for granted that you must stop here for a while. Now, you shall see Esther Marie and dry your hair and take something hot and strengthening, all at the same time. We shall be getting on very fast after all, you see."

Hilda had to acknowledge that it was the best thing to be done under the circumstances, although she was by no means sure of the drying of her clothes in the given time. She made up her mind to go as soon as her hair was dry, in borrowed garments if need be, and, slipping into her next prettiest frock, go back to the dance with all speed. She had no mind to give explanations of her absence. Having settled the matter with herself, she was quite free to give herself up to the pleasant period of interlude, and she entered the bedroom with an exclamation of real delight in the sight of Esther Marie sitting up in bed drinking warm milk from a beautiful crystal goblet, her red-gold head wrapped in a towel.

Esther Marie set the goblet down as she saw her, and she stretched out her arms impetuously, almost upsetting the tray on her knees.

"How can I ever, ever, ever thank you?" she cried ardently. "I'll have to spend my whole life making up for what you've done. You've saved my life,—rescued me from a watery grave!"

She was so fervent, so unconsciously melodra-

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matic that she was funny. Hilda returned the warm caress but she laughed. Seeing Esther Marie safe and sound and drinking milk from a carved goblet, she felt she could laugh now. It would have been very different had the same words been uttered on the dam-breast or in the flooded kitchen.

Nevertheless, it was all very pleasant,—the sense of safety and the enveloping luxury of the room, the gratitude of Miss DuBois, as well as that of Esther Marie. The warm drink that she was gently ordered to take while Jennie deftly dried her hair was very agreeable, too, for the shock and strain had been greater than she had at first realized. Altogether it was a very comfortable interval and she was almost sorry when Jennie pronounced her hair to be quite dry and ready to be done up.

“ I’ll get your things from the laundry now, Miss Hare,” she said. “ I’m sure they must be done.”

Hilda was equally sure they could not be but she made no comment, except to ask if she might borrow some other clothes to wear home in case her own were not wearable. She sat down before Esther Marie’s dressing-table and twisted her hair into its usual knot at the back of her head, answering some remark of Miss DuBois’ rather absently. She was trying to decide whether she should select the blue georgette or the white tulle.

Jennie’s return put an end to her indecision. The



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smiling maid bore the pink chiffon-and-silver frock in triumph in one hand and the dainty silk underthings in the other. All were fresh and immaculate as when new.

Hilda's gasp of surprise brought the pleased explanation from Jennie. "Beulah says the chiffon-cloth always does up something wonderful, and those crêpes and wash silks are just the same. They're so easy to dry, too,—just like a veil. Beulah says she hopes you'll think them good enough to go to your party in, Miss Hare." It was plain that the whole household was eager to serve the rescuer of their impetuous young mistress.

Hilda vowed that the things looked better than they had been before their bath and she followed Jennie to the guest-room opposite, feeling that her time had been very well spent at The Pines, since she could not have made such good time had she gone back home to dry her hair and dress.

Esther Marie lay back on her pillows while little Miss DuBois gently dried her shining locks and she fairly glowed with admiration as Hilda in the renovated draperies came to say good-night.

"You've done another perfectly sweet thing for me in staying here," she declared earnestly. "I've had the chance of seeing you in your party dress, and I'll never, never forget how positively angelic you look to me. When I think of that horrid black

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water and look at you now, I'm quite sure that it was an angel that rescued me"—she was about to say "from that watery grave," but Hilda's smile checked her and she substituted dexterously, "from that disgusting spot."

She kissed Hilda very heartily and before she let her go, she whispered, "I'll never go out at night again alone, I promise you that, Angel of Bethesda!"

She was very much in earnest and she did not relish Hilda's irrepressible ripple. She was very quick to hide her embarrassment and she added as she waved her benignantly from the room, "I'll see you to-morrow, perhaps. Tell that Jack-cousin of yours that he may have my collection if he wants them. I'm done with that sort of thing."

Hilda, still smiling, made her way down-stairs and out to the car where Jackson, the Skelton chauffeur, waited her coming. He, too, had made use of his time, for Betty's car was dry and fit as ever.

"Good-night, Miss DuBois. I'll be over in the morning to see how Esther Marie feels after her plunge," she said brightly as she got in.

But when the car was on its way she made the most of her moment of absolute rest. She was glad that Miss DuBois had insisted on Jackson running the car for her, and she settled down in the seat





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with a little sigh of satisfaction that the tragic episode was so well closed. She had been able to save a life and to escape without inconvenience,—even her silver slippers being found by Jennie entirely unharmed on the floor of the car where she had kicked them off in her haste.

“And I’ve only been gone a scant hour,” she thought, glancing at the rising moon behind the gables of the club-house. “What a lot has happened in that time. It certainly was some adventure.”

Some late arrivals were going in as she left Jackson and the car and made her way to the dressing-room. Two beautifully gowned women were before the long mirrors settling stray hair and adjusting their draperies. One of them turned at Hilda’s entrance with a little cry of surprise. It was Mrs. Bradford!

Hilda greeted her with her heart in her eyes. Here was a fitting climax to her heroic hour. She felt as though her measure of reward for the brief moment in the dark waters of Mullen’s Pond were heaped-up and running over.

Mrs. Bradford seemed almost equally glad to see her young friend. She introduced her to her companion with great cordiality, and when they began the ascent of the stairs to the ballroom and were joined by their escorts, she presented Captain Mulford and Major Potts, insisting gaily that Hilda

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must take compassion on each soldier for at least two dances, after the first necessary rounds with herself and Mrs. Mills had been gone through with.

Hilda returned the Captain's effusive bow with courteous coolness. She knew that she could invent some excuse for evading the dances with him and she did not want to wound her kind friend by reviving that unpleasant episode of the Company Dance. She had intended to crush him with chilly dignity, but under Mrs. Bradford's smiling eyes, she could not show her real feelings. Beside, she realized how little the affair mattered to her now. That dark baptism in Mullen's Pond had given her a keener sense of values.

She met Jack at the ballroom entrance and he turned to walk with her across the shining floor. His face was both puzzled and relieved. "Where have you been?" he demanded under his breath. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Betty Yarrow said you borrowed her car but you weren't at home and ——"

Her heart warmed with the certainty he had been anxious about her and she impulsively slipped a hand through his arm as they threaded their way through the rapidly gathering couples. "I'll tell you all about it later on,—after we get home," she replied in the same low tone. "Don't say anything more about it now. I'll explain it somehow to the



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others. Oh, there's Leslie coming, so it must be his dance,—I've lost count."

Leslie caught her eye and nodded grimly. He was evidently in a stern humor and Hilda giggled at his forbidding air. Before he reached her she had a sudden desire to make the comradeship between Jack and herself complete beyond a flaw.

"Mrs. Bradford was asking about you, and I had to tell her you were here," she said, looking at him with candid earnestness. "But I said that no doubt you were engaged for all the dances,—I didn't want her to think you lacking in courtesy, you know, and I didn't want, either, to have you endure her when you dislike her so."

Jack was not to be outdone. "Why, I don't dislike her," he replied, flushing. "I just meant that I couldn't fall down and worship her as you did."

Leslie claimed Hilda then and no more could be said, but she was pleasantly surprised later on to see Jack's slender figure steering Mrs. Bradford through the throng of couples in the before-supper dance. She might have enjoyed the spectacle more if Leslie, whose dance it again happened to be, had been in a better humor. He suspected her of having gone off with Mr. Brooks for a ride in the "rip-pin' little car" the young man had spoken of more than once, and the idea of Leslie imagining she admired the heavy Mr. Brooks was too deliciously

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funny to spoil with a confession of the actual facts.

When it came to Betty and the rest a sudden impulse of shyness made her laugh off their questions and so her little escapade soon dropped out of sight.

The rest of the evening passed like a delightful dream. Hilda, with that memory of tragic darkness at the back of her mind, fairly reveled in the bright joyousness of the hour. She danced and chatted, moving in a haze of perfect happiness. Jack's figure in its normal dress added much to her comfort. He looked very attractive, she thought, and he was behaving like such a dear. He danced twice with Mrs. Bradford and once with her friend, Mrs. Mills. Leslie was the only one of her circle who did not win her entire approval. He left her quite alone after supper and only turned up for the last dance.

When it was all over and the farewell speech by the president of the club had been applauded, when the last handshakes had been exchanged and good wishes shouted to the various departing cars, when they were all in Mrs. Chester's big car again and Hilda was cuddled down in a soft, tired, happy heap on the front seat, Leslie, looking straight ahead toward the rising fragment of old moon, unburdened his mind.

"Well, for a girl who used to be such a good

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fellow you've certainly surprised me to-night," he said with withering contempt. "Chasing off half the night with a conceited ass like that Brooks,—with his 'rippin' little car' and his bragging about himself! I'm disappointed in you, though I hate to say it."

Hilda giggled. "Mr. Brooks is a very entertaining person," she said gaily. "I've learned a lot about old aristocratic southern families to-night. He knows a lot about cars and horses, too. Jack ought to have him look Bonaparte over."

Leslie's snort of derision was his only answer and, as she was too deliciously tired and sleepy to carry on the joking, their conversation ended there. He handed her out at the door of Grey Cot with great politeness and the merry farewells of the others hid his silence. Hilda did not remember till she was on the threshold that he had not said good-night and she waved to him with the old "good-bye signal" of their childish code. But he did not even turn his head.

She turned to Jack as they went in. The warm little spot in her heart had not cooled during her last happy hour.

"Oh, Jack, it was sweet of you to dance with her after all," she said. "I was so glad for her to see, too, how nice you really are."

Jack opened his eyes a little at this, but he did not



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resent it. Indeed, he seemed to like it exceedingly. "Oh, that wasn't anything. I had to be decent, you know, on your account. Didn't want her to think you had a regular boob on your hands," he replied in an offhand way.

They paused under the hall-light and looked at each other, smiling. Suddenly Jack recalled something.

"But what in thunder were you up to when you streaked off in the middle of things?" he asked.

Hilda told him in as few words as might be and with as little mention of her own part of it as possible, but the fact loomed large to Jack.

"Great snakes, and you went off and saved that red-haired young idiot's life and never said a word about it," he exclaimed. "Why, it isn't one girl in a thousand could have done it,—kept mum, I mean. You're a brick, Cousin Hilda, and I'm proud of you!"

His admiration of her reserve,—which had been almost a matter of chance,—moved Hilda to explanation. But Jack did not listen. He broke out before she had fairly begun. He, too, had his explanations to make and they were urgent.

"About that telegram," he said. "We might as well get that straight now. It wasn't anything, as I told you then. It was only from Jim Williams about the clothes for to-night."

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“For to-night?” echoed Hilda blankly. “What clothes?”

“The dress suit for the dance to-night,” he explained patiently. “I didn’t have any, you know. And I thought I’d borrow from the Williamses,—Bud’s my size but older. But you saw what he said, ‘Nothing doing,’ and so I couldn’t borrow from them. I was up a tree. I wouldn’t take old Jim’s advice and hire,—they made that pretty well, didn’t they? Spelling hire that way, ‘Better higher,’ wouldn’t give me away no matter who read the telegram.”

Hilda gave a gasp of dismay. “But you don’t mean ——” she began.

He shook his head emphatically. “Not for me,” he assured her. “No hired rig on my carcass. I did better. Aunt Alice told me to choose my own birthday present while I was East, and so I went down and got the suit. I wrote her about it. She said she’d send the check whenever I wrote for it, so it’s safe enough. I had some cash with me and I paid some down, though I didn’t have to.”

Hilda laughed in relief at the solution of her suspicions as to the telegram. “But why did you go to so much trouble for dress clothes?” she asked. “You really didn’t have to have them, did you? The other boys seemed to have a good enough time in their best suits.”

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He cast a wondering look at her. "Do you think I was going to wear little-boy clothes when I was going out with you—with you people?" he demanded.

Hilda turned toward the stairs, feeling the strain of the past excitement now in all her tired muscles. On the first landing she paused, looking down at him still standing under the light. "But why did you go down the tree?" she asked, not wishing to leave anything unexplained.

"Because I wrote three letters to Aunt Alice,—in case of delay in the mails," he grinned. "I posted them in different districts, so they'd go out in different deliveries. I was afraid you'd spot me if I went down-stairs the regular way."

She went on up-stairs then, smiling over the simple solving of the puzzle. On the top step she stopped again and leaned over the railing. An illuminating certainty had flashed upon her that moment.

"You got those clothes to show off before Janey Sloan," she called down. "Oh, John Howard Hastings, what a bluffer you are!"

There was no reply. The light snapped off in the hall below and an absolute silence reigned. Hilda chuckled as she crossed the landing to her own room.

"The little goose," she thought indulgently.



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Then she threw her cloak on a chair and yawned contentedly.

“It’s been a wonderful night,” she said to herself. “Perhaps parties aren’t such a waste after all.”

Just as she was getting into bed she stopped with a little gasp of surprise. “I never looked at the rooms at The Pines,” she murmured in amazement at her carelessness. “I didn’t see a single thing all the time I was there—stupid thing that I am!” Then she shrugged her shoulders. “I’ll have to make up for it the next time I have a chance,” she told herself. “I shall certainly have plenty of opportunity now——”

## CHAPTER XVI

### MAKING PROGRESS

JEAN'S cablegram came next morning while Hilda was busy with her account book.

She and Jack were in the summer-house and a scribbled list of her expenditures for Page Carter was before them. He had insisted on knowing exactly how much had been spent. "I want to know how much I've got to produce," he remarked. "If you won't get your allowance until Monday and Miss Carter is going to leave the Hoffman on Sunday, we've got to settle up with each other right now."

Hilda puckered her brow at the list. It was larger than she had expected. Five days in the little private room at four dollars a day, an extra night nurse for the first night when Hilda had been anxious about the effect of the moving from the ward to the room, and a few other extras had swelled the sum to thirty dollars. She thought of the accounts at Harkin's and at Smith and Sons with a shudder.

"Never mind, you're not going to pay me till

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next winter," Jack assured her, mistaking the shudder. "I won't take a cent ——"

"But," she broke in, "my accounts won't be straight, anyway. Can't you see? Here's the list of money spent and here's the hundred I got on the eighteenth and there are,—other things," she ended lamely.

He whistled. Then he looked at her earnestly. "Won't you let me help just this once?" he asked soberly. "This wouldn't happen again, you see. You won't have another sick friend to pony up for. Let me pay my share for her,—I've all the cash I need,—and then you'll be able to come out square, won't you?"

It was a great temptation. Hilda sat playing with her pencil, and it lured her mightily. She wanted to accept Jack's offer more than she wanted anything else at that moment. It stood to her for the partnership, her mother's approval, and the escape from failure which had been haunting her recently.

It was at this precise moment the cable came.

She took it with an eager hand, glad of the respite. She would make her decision afterward. She tore the envelope and read slowly and then she held it out to Jack. "He didn't die after all," she said solemnly. "I knew he wouldn't. Oh, I do hope he's going to get well soon!"



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Jack took the paper and read Jean's short message. He had been told of Jean's sorrowful journey. He looked doubtful as his eyes followed the brief words. "Hal returning with us on the *Silesian*. Have written. Jean."

"It might mean almost anything," he admitted. "I guess it's best to look on the sunny side. He may be lots better, as you say. Doctors make mistakes. Funny, how many mistakes they make. They said Aunt Alice couldn't pull through, but she was getting well right along when I left."

His words helped strengthen Hilda's belief in her cheerful view. She folded the paper and went back to the accounts with a better grace. She no longer hesitated as to her decision. She laid a hand on Jack's arm as she spoke but her voice was firm.

"I'll take your money as a loan," she said. "I'm very glad to have it, too. But it will have to show on the books. I won't sail under false colors. If I have to lose the partnership, I'll have to,—that's all."

It was easy to say this under the spell of Jean's cablegram with the memory of Hal's heroism fresh before her. She felt it so strongly that she impressed Jack.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly. "If you feel that way about it, I won't butt in. You've got two months, anyway, haven't you?"

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“Yes, the time limit is two months, but I am to have all my accounts square for each month,” she explained, rather ruefully. “I don’t believe I ought to try to patch it up by coming out square at the end. I could do that, easily, though,” she ended. “I’ll get some money from—another investment by the middle of the month, I think.”

Jack’s answer was lost in the honk of a horn, and the big limousine from The Pines came sedately through the gateway. Miss DuBois was inside almost buried beneath a mountain of flowers. Esther Marie’s bright head showed opposite her and her arms were full.

As the car halted, she caught sight of them in the summer-house and she sprang out, rushing to Hilda and then halting half-way to return to Miss DuBois, whose slower motions put a check on her dancing eagerness. Hilda met them before Miss DuBois had quite extricated herself from the flowers. Jackson had just helped her to the ground and Hilda had begun a pleased greeting, when Esther Marie broke out impetuously.

“Oh, please don’t let’s talk politeness on this auspicious morning,” she cried. “Of course, it’s sweet of Aunty Lavendar to hurry over so early in the day and you’re delighted to have her, but do let’s get on to the important things. We’ve brought some paltry flowers—and they’re the very

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best we've got,—and we've scoured the shops for a worthy gift—and the shops are wretched places. You won't like what I chose but it's all I could get; I knew what you liked but ——” and without more words she laid her first parcel in Hilda's hand.

Hilda took it gratefully, but she nevertheless halted to present Jack to Miss DuBois, and then suggested that they go to the house. She thought that Esther Marie would prefer to have an eye on the bestowal of the flowers which Jackson was handing over to John's care.

“May we not go to your pretty bower there?” asked Miss DuBois, and Esther Marie pounced on the suggestion. The summer-house was near and she could make her offerings at once. So they settled themselves in the pleasant leafy retreat, and Miss Skelton deposited her parcels on the table,—Jack had deftly removed Hilda's books to a distant corner.

“Now do open them,” she implored. “Aunt Lavendar, please tell her to open them.”

Miss DuBois smiled across at Hilda, whose fingers were busy with the ribbons. “I think Miss Hare is willing to see what is there quite as much as I am,” she said pleasantly, adding with a smile, “You didn't explain to her, my dear, that it was you who scoured the shops while I sat comfortably



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in the car. She must not think I had anything to do with selecting the things."

Esther Marie flashed around to squeeze little Miss DuBois in a tight embrace, crying, "Ah, you are afraid they aren't nice, Aunty Lavendar, but you won't get off that way. It was you who told me what to get."

Hilda took out the beautiful edition of "The Art of the Early Weaver," and she showed her delight. But before she could open her mouth in thanks, Esther Marie cried impatiently, "Open the rest! Oh, do open the rest!" And so she undid the other three parcels and found in the first a companion volume, "The Art of the Early Silversmith," and in the second, "Ancient Rugs and Their Makers," while the third flat package yielded a lovely length of silken tissue with embroidery and tiny tassels, all of a soft heavenly blue which the eager Esther Marie said was a genuine bit of oriental silk.

"That's the only thing I didn't get from the shops," she confessed, radiant at Hilda's delight. "Father told me I might give it to you when I 'phoned to him this morning very early. He got it in Arabia and it's genuine. Aunty Lavendar remembered what sort of books you'd like but I had to have my own real share in it, so I bought them all by myself."

"They're all lovely," exclaimed Hilda in amaze-

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ment at such bounteous gifts. "They're beautiful, wonderful, but,—but,—so many, so much ——"

Miss DuBois waved Esther Marie to silence and spoke with gentle dignity. "My dear," she said sweetly, "Esther Marie and I don't mean to measure our gratitude by such poor means. We are only trying to express a very small part of our affection for the dear girl who has been so very good to us. We both hope that we are all to be very good friends after this," and she included Jack in her fluttering look. "I am sure we ought to be friends since we are already quite near neighbors."

"Yes, indeed," replied Jack most unexpectedly. "We do live pretty near each other. And if you like horses, Miss DuBois, I can bring Bonaparte over any time you'd like to see him. He's thin, but he's got blood."

Little Miss DuBois was quite bewildered by Hilda's mirth. She assured Jack that she really preferred horses to machines and her interest so elated Jack that he was about to bring out the animal then and there for her inspection. Luckily, Leslie appeared at that moment and his astonishment at the scene gave Esther Marie her chance.

After the introductions had been duly performed, she told very graphically indeed the story of her drowning and her rescue by Hilda. She did ample justice to the courage of her rescuer and made a

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very dramatic affair of it. Hilda hardly recognized herself in the portrayal. Leslie was much impressed.

After the enthusiastic Miss Skelton and gentle little Miss DuBois had left, promising to come again soon, Leslie turned to Hilda with the most comical expression on his good-natured face. Hilda held up her hand before he could speak.

"Don't say you're sorry you were grumpy," she laughed. "It was lots of fun to hear you go on. Poor Mr. Brooks' ears must have burned. No," she added, as he tried to break in, "I'm not going to listen to any nonsense about being sorry. You may as well go along with Jack to inquire about Bonaparte's health. I've got an engagement with Mr. Dalton and I'm late, too."

She ran off to the house, leaving him to Jack's society. "Good old Leslie," she thought, merrily. "He'll never forget those speeches of his. He'll try to make it up to me every time he has a chance."

Nevertheless, she was pleased that he should realize how thoroughly he had misjudged her. It was pleasant, too, to see the admiring looks of John and Martha, to whom Jackson had related last night's occurrence. It was gratifying to hear their flurried words of praise and to know that all her little world was approving her. She wondered how Page



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would look when she heard it,—“ But not from me,” she said emphatically, with a blush.

She wished someone might have told Mrs. Bradford and she thought a good deal about that charming lady as she drove to her lesson. The dance last night had wiped the tiny cloud from the sky of her devotion and the full sun shone brightly again. Captain Mulford had kept respectfully in the background, proving that Mrs. Bradford had made him understand that his conduct had not pleased either her or her young friend. After that first meeting at the entrance of the ballroom he had not come near Hilda again. She felt entirely satisfied with Mrs. Bradford's conduct.

“ I do hope she will like the room,” she thought. “ Mr. Dalton doesn't know it's for her, of course, but he says it would suit the most critical lady in the world.”

At the quiet house in Barford Street she found Mr. Dalton in a rather perturbed state. He, too, had a cablegram from Jean and he had not taken the same cheerful view of it as had Hilda. He seemed much disturbed and Hilda could see that it was hard for him to keep his mind on the subject, which happened to be Rugs. After a few minutes' hesitation she ventured her suggestion.

“ If you'd rather postpone the lesson to-day, Mr. Dalton, I can come again any time you wish,” she

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said. "I have just had a present of a book on Rugs, and I could be reading that up for the next lesson, if you say so."

He meditated for a moment and then answered seriously, "I believe that would be a good arrangement. I shall probably be out of town for a few days and can let you know when I return. And, by the way, that friend of yours,—will you ask her to postpone her visit? I shall be at liberty after next week and will be glad to see her then."

Hilda promised eagerly. She wished she might be of some service to her kind friend but there was nothing else she could do, except pack her things and say good-bye as quickly as possible. She left him with a hopeful word about Hal,—a word which came from her heart,—and then she went over to the hospital to see Page on her way home.

Page was sitting up. Her recovery had been marvelous since Hilda had intervened, for she was one of those people for whom love is the best tonic. She was fairly blossoming into health and her face lighted with a pretty joy when Hilda came into the little room.

Hilda saw her opportunity had come.

"I've made arrangements for Sunday," she said after greeting her. "You're to leave here, you know. Jack will come for your things about ten

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and when he comes back, we'll go home. I have your room ready ——”

“ But I can't ——” broke in Page in distress.

“ You can and you will,” interrupted Hilda firmly. “ There isn't any place for you to go, anyway. Your room at Mrs. Wilkin's is rented and your trunk is over at Grey Cot, in your room.”

Page sank back bewildered. She was too weak to argue and she felt helpless before Hilda's crisp determination. She looked as though she were going to weep.

“ There's no use fussing,” smiled Hilda brightly. “ You just have to submit. I'm doing just exactly what your brother would want me to do,—remember that. He wouldn't hear of your going back to that forlorn place, would he? ”

“ N-no,” replied Page doubtfully.

“ Well then, there's nothing to do but come to Grey Cot. You can't go to Watson's either for weeks,” returned Hilda promptly, and with that matter disposed of, she turned to other subjects. She was not going to let Page spoil her well-laid plans by balking at the last moment, and she knew if she got her point now, it would be settled. She talked of Page's latest letter, of her mother's news, of the festivities of the afternoon and evening until she had Page in a cheerful mood again.



## *MAKING PROGRESS.*

Then she kissed her and left her, glad that all was going smoothly.

She had notified the clerk at the desk that the room would be vacant after Sunday morning and she was half-way home before she recalled her wish regarding Mullen's Pond. She laughed out loud. "What a goose I was," she thought. "Wanting to go peacocking about before Page as a heroine! It's a blessing I don't have the chance to fish out a youngster every week, or there'd be no living with me."

Some old ladies in a passing car turned to look at her and she suddenly realized she was on the public highway. She put on speed and fled homeward, still smiling. Jack ran out as she swung into the drive. "Anything up?" he called, anxiously.

"Not a thing," she told him, as she sprang out. "I've had a half-holiday, that's all, and I'm going straight up to get ready. We'll go over to the club as soon as you please."

She had forgotten all about herself as heroine and flew to her dressing with a light heart. "Good old Jackie was dying to go soon and he wouldn't breathe a word," she thought. "He made up such perfectly good excuses that he fooled me. But his eyes just popped when he saw me. He's racing to beat me now. I'll have to break my neck to be ready soon, and I'll see that he has a splendid time.

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

He was a dear to wait for me, instead of going himself when he was so wild to go."

She kept her good intentions in mind but when they reached the club she found that somehow the news of her adventure of the night before had gotten out, and she was besieged by questions, comments, and lavish praise. She did not understand how it had leaked out until she came on Leslie near the tennis courts. Then it flashed on her that he had been making up for his mistake. She pounced on him.

"Why in the world did you tell?" she demanded with reproachful eyes. "You know——"

"Well, don't you like it?" he laughed. "I should think it would be mighty fine to be the centre of the admiring throng."

She laughed and blushed and then became more serious. "I did think I'd like it," she confessed, "but it makes me feel rather silly. Please let me come and play a set with you. They'll forget about it by that time."

He grunted and gave her a racquet. "We'll have to hustle," he said briefly. "The matches begin in an hour."

She soon forgot her sudden shyness in the game and after that the matches were beginning and in the hustle for places she became one of the crowd

## MAKING PROGRESS

again, and had a most delightful time. Jack came for her just before lunch.

"They're here," he said.

"Who?" she asked absently. She had actually forgotten that they were to lunch with the Sloans' party. The excitement of the matches, the events of the last two days had completely blotted out that fact. Jack's disgust reminded her. "Oh, of course, we'll get the car and go right over to the Row," she added briskly. "I hope Baxter won't cut us off with a crust because we're late."

She felt remorse as she felt how eager he was. "We ought to have joined the Sloans half an hour ago," she said to him as they went to get the car. "Why didn't you tell me they were here?"

He was looking rather gloomy, she thought, and he merely murmured something under his breath, as they turned the foursome into the wide smooth driveway that encircled the club courts. She was enlightened, however, when they reached the big car where Mrs. Chester was dispensing hospitality in place of Mrs. Sloan and where Janey was smiling on a lanky youth whose whole attention seemed to be centred on his heaping plate.

In the buzz of welcome that greeted them Hilda saw that Janey merely lifted a careless hand in their direction. She did not turn as Jack leaned over to speak to her, but flung her welcome back over her



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

shoulder in an interval of her chatter to the lanky youth. "Oh, you found her, after all," she said and then turned all her interest on her companion. It was evident that Jack had been there earlier and had been dispatched for Hilda.

"Poor Jackie," she thought, hiding a smile. "These kid-boys are awfully funny about girls. Fancy his being cut up about Janey Sloan's dropping him! Everybody knows Janey."

She suddenly determined to keep her promise to herself about him. "Let's go over to that end of the line," she suggested. "I want to see Betty and Jim."

His face did not lighten as he steered the car to the more distant point where two cars with the Yarrows and Alice Clark, Leslie and Marta Collins were being served by Baxter's minions. But after the gay welcome he seemed to find the merry chatter, the comments on the preliminary events and the good things which Baxter brought to the late-comers, a very good substitute for Janey Sloan. He began to laugh and talk almost as usual.

Hilda, feeling her purpose gained, whispered,—just to pretend she hadn't noticed his snubbing by Janey,—“What a perfectly jolly day it is. I never saw a gayer crowd or a finer Field Day. And such a luncheon! I don't believe Mrs. Morton can get up anything better than this.”

## MAKING PROGRESS

Jack quietly finished the mushroom from his chicken à la king before he answered. Looking over to where Janey was sitting beside her mute swain, he said gravely, "Yes, it's fine." And then after a slight pause he had added, "And the dance was fine, but not quite fine enough to make up for blowing in all that good cash on those dress clothes."

Hilda, though she had teased him, had not realized until then that Jack's purchase actually had been made with the vision of little bubbling Janey in mind,—Janey whose main purpose in life was to have a good time regardless of everything, and who tired of her friends and took them up again with clock-like regularity. She looked at him with sympathetic eyes. "Oh, you poor old thing, to think that you actually got those clothes to make an impression on that dear little goose ——" she began, but he checked her with a wave of his fork. It was plain that he preferred another topic.

Marta leaned forward. "Do you mean to tell me, John Howard Hastings, that you're going to back out of the Outsiders' Matches?" she asked. "I've been watching your play almost every day since Leslie brought you over, and we're counting on you to bring honor on the club which shelters your homeless racquet."

Hilda turned to Jack in surprise. She had not heard of his being entered. She saw him open his

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

eyes wide and frown, as he replied quickly, "Of course I'm going to play. Who told you I wasn't?"

Marta laughed. "That thin boy over there with Janey said he was going to clean up all the free lance players hereabouts. I thought perhaps you'd heard and dropped out."

Jack did not see that he was being teased. He sat up very straight. "I'm not dropping out, so that you can notice it," he retorted. "You wait and see who gets cleaned up, though."

Hilda could have hugged Marta. Jack was himself again. He ate his bounteous luncheon with a zest. He walked and talked with energy and when his turn came on the courts he made good his hint of victory by winning a love set over the lanky youth. Best of all, when the weathervane of a Janey came to congratulate him on his triumph, he merely laughed good-naturedly and turned to meet Jim Yarrow with a warm smile. Hilda knew he was cured.

As they drove home and passed the dark bulk of The Pines, he flung a careless look at the clustering stables and outbuildings. "I guess I'll have to run over and take a look at the spitfire's little collection," he said rather grandly. "She isn't so bad after all,—for a snip like her."

Hilda did not smile.



## *MAKING PROGRESS*

On the hall table was a note from Mrs. Bradford asking her if it would be possible to have the room ready in another week, as she was preparing to move in and must wait until Hilda's task was complete, according to their arrangement.

Field Days, picnic suppers, tennis matches, all took instant flight. Hilda came back to business with a pleasant jolt.

"Can I? Indeed I can and will!" she said joyfully as she went up-stairs to her room. "I'll put on steam and have it done in three days. My allowance comes on Monday. I'll finish the room and get paid by the twenty-first or second. Oh, I'd so love to have it all straightened up before Mother comes home, and I do believe I shall."

## CHAPTER XVII

### INTERLUDES

HILDA was writing to her mother.

The calendar on her desk showed how time had sped. It was the twenty-fifth. The momentous day when the second instalment of allowance was to straighten her twisted accounts had come and gone. Mrs. Bradford's little room was almost done; the slight delay in the finishing of the floor had caused a postponement of Hilda's winding up her first very important contract. Mrs. Bradford, however, had shown the sweetest patience though, as Hilda knew, her own furnishings were waiting in storage for the completion of the little boudoir.

She wrote rapidly, smiling occasionally.

"I know you will love Page, for she is perfectly sweet. She has gotten over being afraid to meet the family, though she does not want to see other people. Her brother has been ill for a short time down in Rio Janeiro, but he is well again and has saved enough to go into partnership with a very good firm. Of course, they will be rather poor for a good while, but it is splendid to think he did not have to give up."

## INTERLUDES

She sat nibbling the end of her pen and puckering her forehead after this. It was hard to write what she had set herself to write next. She sighed, straightened her shoulders and began, looking rather sad as she went on.

“About my partnership,—I feel I ought to tell you that I’ve burnt the jam again. I spent more than I ought to have, and I had to borrow from my September allowance to square things up. Jack had loaned me the money and I paid him back as soon as I got mine. If all goes well,—and I am sure it will,—I shall come out all right at the end of next month. But if you think I ought to drop out of the partnership, I will do as you say. Jean will be home soon and if Hal is ill, she will want to be with him, so it will be easier.”

She stopped to sigh. She did not feel that it would be much easier, but she was determined not to try to influence her mother. She could not tell her of the bills for all the draperies, rugs and decorations for Mrs. Bradford’s room,—which really were not debts of her own, since Mrs. Bradford would pay them as soon as presented. Hilda had merely held them back until the room was in readiness, in order to be sure to include every small item in her list of expenses. What she was to receive as reward for her labor troubled her very little. She had decided at the very first to refuse payment ex-



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

cept perhaps a photograph of her admired friend, and she held to it now.

"I simply couldn't take money when she's really doing it for charity," she repeated, staring at the paper.

Her mind had slipped away from the letter and it was hard to go on. She decided she had written enough and, adding a few household items of news and a brief mention of the departure of the family at The Pines for a trip along the coast, she closed with a fervent wish that her mother were home. "I will miss you fearfully at Betty's wedding to-morrow," she added in a post-script.

She sealed and addressed it and took it down for Jack to mail on his way to the club. He was busy in the barn and she gave her letter to John instead and then went to sit with Page who was in the long chair beneath the lindens, almost lost in a nest of downy cushions.

Page laid down her magazine and smiled up at her. "Jack brought his famous Bonaparte out here for me to see," she said. "That's a mighty good bit of horseflesh, if I'm any judge."

Hilda stared at her blankly. "That bony thing?" she gasped. "That poor, weak, thin creature? Why, I thought he was never going to have animation enough to live, let alone be a regular

## INTERLUDES

horse again." Then she asked quickly, "How much do you know about horses, Page?"

Page cocked her head to one side thoughtfully. "I used to be a right smart judge of a horse," she replied slowly. "Carter and I had our hunters and used to ride with the hounds with Father when we were almost babies. Father had good stock, racers and hunters all of them. Jack's nag ought to show up pretty well in another fortnight or so."

"Well, don't tell him so," laughed Hilda. "He's perfectly daft over the creature now. I believe he'd bring him up to his room to stay if he knew how you're talking about blood and all that."

Page laughed and would have answered but John was returning from the post-office and Hilda saw him.

"There's John with the mail! Oh, what a lot."

She abandoned the task of arranging Page's pillows in the long chair and flew over the grass to intercept John, holding out eager hands. She hurried back to Page and dumped the jumble of letters, cards and advertisements into her lap.

"You must play postman, Page, and give me the letters that look best," she laughed. "I shan't read you a story for a whole week, if you don't give me one I want."

Page smiled and sorted the envelopes with her thin fingers. In the days she had been at Grey Cot

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

as the joint-patient of Hilda and Jack,—not to mention the solicitous Martha,—she had made wonderful progress. The doctor was delighted with her improvement, and said frankly he was only coming from force of habit and not because he was needed.

“Here is one from your mother,—you see I know her writing now,—and an envelope that looks like a wedding invitation, and a queer stiff card with a big seal on the cover,” smiled Page, deeply interested in Hilda’s game. “Which one will you choose?”

Hilda cast a searching glance at the three missives and then held out her hand for the envelope with the green seal. “I don’t recognize that writing,” she said. “Let’s have the mystery solved first, so I can enjoy Mother’s news with a free mind. That other is Marian Field’s wedding card; one of the girls at Cohasset,” she explained. “My faith, what a big seal! I’m almost afraid to open it.”

Her face lighted with amusement as her eyes rested on the brief lines written in a large stiff hand across the square card. “It’s from Esther Marie, and she’s coming home on Wednesday,—that’s tomorrow,” she told Page with a ripple. “See how she’s written the lines diagonally across the card, because, she says, writing to me is ‘too rare a thing to be done tamely, like silly every-day letters and lessons.’ Isn’t she the strangest girl?”



## INTERLUDES

"She is evidently mighty different from most gushing girls of her age," commented Page, leaning back and looking up into the leafy bower above her with thoughtful eyes. "Most any girl would have bored you to death with letters and wanting you to write often, and all that. From what you've said of her, I reckon she's left to do what she fancies."

Hilda looked surprised. "I never thought of her that way," she replied. "But it's quite true. She is reserved, in spite of her tremendous way of rushing into things. She has never come to see me unless invited and, since she left for the coast, I haven't had a line from her. It's funny I never thought of it before."

Page was silent, still staring up into the green canopy above her, and Hilda read her letter. "Mother's coming home soon," she said with a little pucker on her forehead. "She doesn't say when, though. She just tells me to expect her,—that's all. Except a message to you and Jack. She says you are to be prepared to adopt her as long as you are here, and that you are to get well promptly. Oh, I'm so glad she's coming home at last! You'll simply adore her, Page, for she's the sweetest ——" she broke off, staring toward the driveway.

A tall familiar figure was coming in.

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

“It can’t be,—yes, it is. It’s Jean!” cried Hilda.

Page, who had been lying back in the long chair, started up and then sat weakly down again. She dropped the magazine and letters on the grass, while Hilda sprang toward the figure coming across the lawn.

“Jean!” she cried with all her heart in her voice. “Oh, Jean!”

Jean, looking worn and pale but with her old careless manner full upon her, strode straight to Hilda, and, in the grasp of her firm hands on Hilda’s outstretched fingers, she answered that cry of the heart. All that she did not say was in that strong pressure.

“Hello, everybody,” she said, with brusque cheerfulness that hid the emotion in her voice. “It’s good to see you again. Introduce me, Hilda, though I’ve only a moment to stop.”

Her nonchalant manner put all into the old grooves again. The moment of meeting was easier for Page than could have been hoped. Jean’s easy assumption of everything being quite normal had its effect at once. As soon as the introductions and first hurried exclamations were over, Hilda drew Jean aside.

“Tell me about Hal,” she said eagerly. “When can I see him?”

Jean looked away to the blue distance, and her

## INTERLUDES

voice hesitated in its drawl. "He's not very fit,—the long trip, you know," she replied unevenly. "To-morrow or the next day, perhaps." Then, squeezing Hilda's hand very hard, she added in a rapid undertone, "If you'd had my letter you'd have known. He wants to see you soon. I'll send you word."

She broke off abruptly and was gone before Hilda could speak, but she returned at once. "I forgot to tell you that I am not going back to Cornwells for a while," she said. "Hal's wonderfully interested and I've been telling him about our partnership. He says he'll bet on you to make things go. I'll be over again to hear all about your work with Mr. Dalton. He said, when he met us at the ferry, that you were making good. I must run now, for Hal's asleep and may want me when he wakes. Tell Miss Carter good-bye for me, will you? I haven't time to go back and talk."

Hilda went slowly back to Page. She stood before the long chair looking down on the slight form surrounded by pillows. "Page," she said very softly, "you're a lucky girl. You're only poor. You've got your brother and you'll be happy with him some day. You're a lucky girl." Then remembering how ill Page had been she picked up the letters and straightened the cushions again. "I'll



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

hunt up Jack with the news," she said; "he will be glad to know Mother is coming home."

She went to the stables, her heart sore within her. Jean's face had told more than her words. She knew, however, that she must not be less brave than Jean, and so she met Jack with her usual manner. It was hard but she managed it.

He received Mrs. Hare's message, and the news of her return at a near moment with enthusiasm, making Hilda smile by his rush toward the other end of the barn and the words flung over his shoulder as he left her.

"Got to give Bony an extra shine and fix up the exhibition-rooms in the stable," he called. "Don't expect me to do any errands this afternoon, for those snakes are a mess, and Bony hasn't been exercised. Great Scott, and she may be here to-morrow!"

Hilda went back to Page and the other letters, still smiling bravely at Jack's desire to please. "He's deserted us for the afternoon, Page," she said, picking up the envelopes that still lay on the grass. "Shall you be able to manage without either of us for a couple of hours? I shan't be longer than that, I'm sure."

Page assured her she should do very well, and she went off to the garage with her mind teeming with plans for the afternoon. She had to go on

## INTERLUDES

with things, had to finish her work, though her head was whirling. She had to run out to Hampton Row to put the final touches on the room; she had an appointment with Mrs. Bradford at three-thirty, when she was to present the bills for the room. It was an afternoon of great affairs for her!

The trip through the bright day helped her greatly. She found the room at the Hampton all that she had hoped it would be. The last few touches were put on it and she stood in the doorway looking on her work as the clock struck three. She had been quick and thorough. "It's lovely," she breathed in a glow of satisfaction. The joy of the creator warmed her heart. "It's perfectly lovely," she repeated. "Oh, I hope she likes it. And how glad I'll be for Mother to see it!"

It was all in dim pale tones of pomegranate and terra-cotta, with hints of dull gold here and there. The soft tone of the walls, the delicacy of the web-like window hangings, the warm deep color of the door curtains filled her with delight and she turned the key on her work with a song of thanksgiving in her heart.

"I've done it," she told herself as she hurried down the broad front steps. "I've done it before Mother got back. I'll pay all the bills to-morrow morning early and then I'll be ready whenever she comes."

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

At the Ardsmore she met with a sharp disappointment. Mrs. Bradford was not in and had left a note for her instead. Hilda, with her hopes deferred, read the perfumed missive in the office under the eyes of the nonchalant clerk.

“I am heart-broken,” the note ran, “to have to run away at this great moment, but I have some business which must be settled. I shall see you in a couple of days at the utmost. Until then, your friend always, Margaret Bradford.”

Hilda went home rather soberly and after she had spent a determinedly cheerful hour with Page, she went up to her room and got out the stack of bills which had gathered bulk in the weeks since her first purchase at Harkin's.

“After all,” she said, as she finished sorting and summing them up, “it's better to wait a bit. There may be something else I've forgotten. Let me see—yes, there's the little rug for the fireplace. Smith's didn't send the bill for that yet, though I told them I wanted each bill as I bought the goods. It's just as well I didn't see her to-day. I'd hate to be bringing up dribs after the big bill was settled.”

She ruffled the papers through her fingers absently. “I wonder,” she said slowly, “when Mother really will get home. I begin to wish that



## *INTERLUDES*

she'd stay just a few more days. I'm wild to see her but ——”

She got up shoving the bunch of papers into their pigeonhole and shutting the desk with a click.

“If I can get those horrid bills cleared off and show a good record with Mr. Dalton, I believe I have a chance,” she thought. “I certainly scorched my jam last month but I'm pretty sure Mother wouldn't say it was badly burnt.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

### WEDDING FAVORS AND FAREWELLS

THE door of the limousine banged shut and they were off.

Hilda sank back on the seat, careful of her draperies, and gave herself up to the full enjoyment of the hour. She was going to Betty's wedding with Miriam Griffeth, another<sup>1</sup> bridesmaid. Her mother had not returned and Jack had already gone with Leslie. Miriam, who had been at the rehearsal which Hilda had missed, was all enthusiasm for Lawrence's friend from West Point.

Hilda settled her filmy yellow crêpe,—she and Miriam were the two pale-yellow bridesmaids who were to walk after the pale blue and just before the pale violet ones,—and began to draw on her gloves,—the very gloves that she had used as a lure on that day in July to draw her mother's interest to Page, but which had failed so signally in their aim.

“To think of little Betty being actually an old married woman in about half an hour,” said Miriam, as they got out at the entrance to the little church and went toward the vestibule where the other bridesmaids and ushers were already assem-

## WEDDING FAVORS

bled. "It makes one feel positively aged, doesn't it? I feel that being nineteen has a serious side to it, I can tell you."

Hilda laughed. "I'm only seventeen and two months," she said lightly. "I guess I'm too young to feel the burden of my years yet. Why, there's Jean going in at the side entrance. How sweet of her to come,—I really didn't think she would be here."

Miriam looked and nodded. "Jean's always pretty fine," she said, and then they were in the vestibule and the vortex closed about them. Hilda forgot Jean and every other outside interest in the delightful excitement of the next quarter of an hour.

Betty and her father, the procession up the aisle to the solemn music of the wedding march, the sacramental words at the flower-decked railing, the placing of the shining gold band on Betty's slim finger by the pale and agitated Lawrence,—all the ceremonials of the important moment, kept Hilda's whole attention. It was not until after it was all over, and the ushers and bridesmaids were forming into the final procession that she looked about her at the audience seated in the pews.

She saw Mrs. Morton and Mrs. Clark in the second pew, and Miss Landis just behind them. Far over near the south wall she caught Jean's eyes



## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

fixed on her with a curiously compelling look. "She wants to speak to me," she thought, and unconsciously she nodded an assent to the unspoken appeal. "I'll see her outside," she said to herself, and as soon as she was free to leave the crowded vestibule she hurried over to the side entrance. Jean was waiting there.

"What is it?" asked Hilda. "I felt that you wanted me and so I ran off for a moment. I've only a second or two ——"

Jean's voice was level and hard as she broke in on Hilda's eager speech.

"Hal wanted me to ask you to stop after the reception. He'll be on the back terrace," she said monotonously. "He doesn't want to wait till tomorrow, after all."

"Oh, then he's better!" cried Hilda joyfully. "I was sure he was better when I saw you here. I'll be there about half-past four. Give him my love and tell him I'll be right on time."

She wondered, after she was again in the limousine with Miriam, Jim and Leslie and was speeding up the long avenue to the stately Yarrow mansion, why Jean had spoken so abruptly. She remembered, too, that she had been strangely stern and pale. But this thought had barely time to flit into her mind before it was chased away by the gay chatter that always went where Miriam Griffeth was.

## WEDDING FAVORS

“Pity they’ve only got a week after all,” said Leslie. “Lawrence found the three months he’d been promised has to be cut down to a week, and mighty lucky to get that. But they’ll have the trip down to Rio for their honeymoon. He’s got to plunge right in when he gets there.”

They were at the front entrance and the car stopped to let them out, but the words stuck in Hilda’s mind. She had not heard this change of plans.

“They ought to have given him a month at least,” she thought, forgetting her earlier views on long holiday trips. “It doesn’t seem quite fair to Betty to set him to work so soon.”

In spite of the fact that Betty and Lawrence were to go so far away for an indefinite period, the reception and the wedding breakfast were the gayest Hilda had ever known. The lavish decorations, the filmy gowns and dainty coloring of the groups on the lawn and in the beautiful rooms, made a charming scene. The high spirits of the best man who was on short leave added a note of hilarity to the usual festivity of the wedding breakfast, and Hilda, who was at the large central table with the bride and groom and the rest of the wedding party, enjoyed every moment of the time.

It was after the breakfast was over and the merry crowd, waiting in the spacious hall for the first

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

glimpse of the bride as she came down in her traveling dress, were murmuring about her that Hilda had another pang of regret for the briefness of Betty's honeymoon trip. The slender little figure in pale grey and white, looking down on them with eyes that passed them all to find the spot where Lawrence waited, seemed like a new Betty—a Betty whose path had suddenly forked from the road they had all trodden together in laughter and careless childish eagerness.

“An old married woman,” repeated Miriam in her ear. “She looks awfully sweet, doesn't she? That wide hat is too becoming for words. Oh, there, she's throwing the bouquet,—catch it, Hilda, it's coming ——”

Hilda did not catch it. The flowery, gauzy meteor whirled past her and landed in Janey Sloan's outstretched hands. There was the usual merry shout, the rustle of motion to see who had got it, and Janey's voice, protesting that she didn't want it at all,—it was a mistake, and so on; all of which was instantly forgotten in the rush of farewells to the happy little bride and the pale, dignified bridegroom.

Hilda managed to kiss Betty good-bye at the very last moment and the wish for a happy trip was from the bottom of her heart. The thought of wasted tips that might have been spent on



## WEDDING FAVORS

the Armenians did not even dimly recur to her now.

The machine with the newly-married pair sped down the long drive, leaving a shower of rose-leaf confetti behind it and a voice close to Hilda's elbow said, "That's what I'm going to do the minute I'm old enough. But say, Cousin Hilda, wouldn't that Janey Sloan make you weary,—pretending not to want the bouquet, when I saw her clawing after it for all she was worth."

Hilda faced Jack with a merry twinkle. "So you aren't a candidate for partnership with Janey any more?" she teased. "I thought you got those clothes in order to be ready at any moment."

Jack grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not always crazy," he replied airily. "A man gets tired of those babyfied girls who can't touch a worm,—oh, I forgot," he interrupted himself, "Leslie's looking for you. He said he'd promised to take you some place at half-past four. He's got the car by the side entrance."

Hilda's face sobered suddenly. She nodded her thanks as he slipped away to the group of youngsters who were enjoying themselves in their own way at the other side of the house. She made her adieus hastily and telling Miriam that she was not going back with her, she went quickly to where Leslie waited.

## *HILDA OF GREY COT*

He knew that she was going to see Hal and he drove swiftly. He set her down at the entrance to the MacAllister gardens and then without a word he drove away. Hilda was grateful for his thoughtfulness, though she was hardly conscious of any feeling at that moment. The sight of the familiar grounds and the house beyond with its broad terraces and gay awnings roused a sudden turmoil in her heart. Jean's stern set face came back now with a suggestion of tragedy that smote her sharply.

Unconsciously she hurried up the curving walk, quickening her steps as the single stroke of the bell from St. James' Chapel across the meadows came to her ears. "I'm on time," she thought, "just half-past four."

Jean met her half-way up the path. She did not utter one word of greeting.

"No, he's on the back terrace," she said quietly.

She turned and led the way in silence.

Hilda knew the back terrace well. It was a broad grey-brick level that had a wide view of the green meadows and groves of the MacAllister domain, with the blue northern hills in the distance. It had been a favorite gathering place for the old crowd.

Hilda caught her breath as, following Jean, she

## WEDDING FAVORS

turned the corner of the house and came upon the familiar spot.

The wicker chairs and tables were there, and the gay, red-striped awning. The floor was covered with the same thick rugs and there were flowers and ferns about just as of old. But in the middle of the terrace under the shade of the gay awning was something Hilda had never seen there before.

A long stretcher-like bed with cushions and draperies that failed to hide its grim outlines stood there and on it lay a wasted figure with a wax-like face—a visible, tangible emblem of the price of victory.

Hilda went forward softly, as Jean stood to one side. She knew now why she had been called,—why Hal did not want to wait until to-morrow.

“Oh, Hal,” she said, stooping to meet the wide brown eyes with her own pained loving look.

Her voice broke for a moment. She could not pretend to mistake the look he lifted to her. The awful majesty of death was already on the features she knew so well. She dropped on her knees beside the bed and took his hand with an aching longing in her breast,—a passionate wish to help, since she could not save.

“Oh, Hal, we’re so proud of you,” she whispered, brokenly. “You’ve done it all for us ——”

He understood her and he smiled faintly, with a



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glint of the old whimsical spirit that was so much like Jean.

“It isn’t all being willing, you see,” he said in a queer weak voice. “I’m willing enough, but my cussed body’s gone back on me. Some other fellow with better muscles had to take over my job. The muscle’s the thing.”

He was silent, gathering strength. Hilda waited, feeling that he had some message for her. Hal always had a purpose in everything he did.

The birds were singing in the sycamores along the meadow brook and the warm scent of sweet dried grass was on the air,—all the bright living world was overflowing with light and warmth and color, while here on the terrace was death.

Hilda, kneeling there by the grim bed with Hal’s wasted hand in her own warm one, in all the freshness and beauty of her bridesmaid’s finery, sobbed suddenly, and then Hal found his voice.

“We’ve been pals all our lives,—you and Jean and I,” he said almost in a whisper. “We’ve always played together, even in this last game.” He stopped for breath for a second. “I had you two kid-girls’ pictures in that comfort-kit you both made for me,—remember how we all laughed when Jean stuck it in? Pigtails on both of you, and

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skinny shanks—never mind, it was the real thing. Kept me going. Helped me pull through—sometimes ——”

He was still so long that she thought he had ended but he got his strength again just as she was about to speak.

“I want you to do something for old times’ sake,” he said quite clearly. “Jean’s going to be mighty lonely. Promise you’ll look after her. Be the same old chums. Girls get separated when they grow up. Don’t get separated. Go on with this partnership game. And go on just the same as if I were here. Don’t mope about me. Promise you’ll act just the same. I’ll be more comfortable over there if I know you two are keeping together and not moping.”

Hilda bent to kiss his white forehead, her tears dropping on his face as she stooped.

“Oh, Hal, it’s such a little thing to ask,” she whispered brokenly. “I’ll do it,—we’ll both do it, Jean and I. We’ll keep together always. But I wish you’d ask more. It’s such a little thing to do for you!”

Hal opened his eyes. He looked appallingly white and weary.

“It’s little, but oh my!” he quoted with the shadow of a grin.

Then he closed his eyes.

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Jean came forward. "I think he wants to rest now," she said gently.

Hilda bent again to kiss the pale forehead and the hand that was already relaxing within her own. Then, without another word or look, she went down the broad stone steps toward the meadow path and took her stumbling way across the fields toward the woods. She knew that she should never see Hal again.

She stumbled blindly on through the sunshine, putting the old unanswerable question to the smiling summer world about her, "Why—why?" She said it over and over again as she went, "Why does he have to die? Why must he die?"

She walked rapidly until she came to the little woods. She did not notice the heat of the day nor the roughness of the pathway. The tears in her eyes flooded out all memories save the grim stretcher-bed and Hal's pale brave face. Hal's eyes and voice filled her whole world. And the question that had no answer kept up its drumming beat upon her heart, "Why—why?"

She sat down to wipe her eyes and try to recover before she should emerge on the highway beyond the woods. Habits of self-control acted in this moment of self-forgetfulness, as all habits do. As she sat still, trying to gain command over her sobs, the memory of the wedding party and Betty's



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face as she looked down to Lawrence came unexpectedly back to her. She sat up, surprised at the difference in her own way of looking at it now.

“Betty was right to want her happiness to last as long as it could,” she said aloud. “When it’s real true happiness like hers and Lawrence’s, it’s worth more than a few blankets or sweaters for people’s bodies, for it is the stuff that lasts forever, after ——” she could not finish, but somehow she felt that she had come upon a part, at least, of the answer to her aching question.

Somewhere in the back of her mind rose an old verse,—a verse memorized one hot Sunday morning long ago, and she repeated it under her breath, “While we look, not at the things that are seen but at the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

To her awakened mind came the wider vision. She saw that it was the spirit and not the material part, that availed. She saw Hal, dying, becoming a greater power in the lives he left behind, a vivid torch to light the way to greater patriotism, to more complete self-abnegation. She saw Carter, sick and struggling, fighting a harder battle than any he had shared upon the battlefield with his heroic comrades, a victory of the will over the flesh. She saw Betty

## HILDA OF GREY COT

and Lawrence, hand in hand, facing the future's possibilities with happy faces, content with life, since they shared it. "The things which are not seen," she murmured.

She rose after a little, drying her eyes and drawing a deep breath. "Yes," she said softly. "The things which are not seen *are* eternal, though I have only been thinking of the other sort, blankets and the like."

As she made her way along the path to the highway she shook her head in wonder at her own blindness. "And I thought myself so clever and practical," she said. "Oh, what an idiot I've always been!"

She walked quickly, once she was on the road, for she wanted to reach home and her own room. She had gone but a short distance, however, when the sound of a motor on the road behind her made her step aside to let the machine pass. She did not look around when it slowed down. She did not want to meet anyone at this time.

It was Leslie's voice that halted her as she left the road for the side path. He was not looking at her, but he held the door of the tonneau open as he said quietly:

"Better jump in and I'll whisk you home. No use walking in all this heat."

Hilda obeyed without a word. She was thankful

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for such kindness but she could not talk. Sometime she would tell Leslie of those heart-breaking moments on the terrace with Hal but just now she had no words. She sat still as the car sped on. She was clinging to that wider vision, though it was harder work now.

"The unseen things," she repeated as though the words were a talisman for peace.

Leslie stopped the car at the edge of the thicket. "The wood-road's pretty rough for this car. I guess you can get home all right," he said, without turning his head as she got out. "I'm in sort of a hurry anyway."

Hilda knew that he meant she could slip in the back way unnoticed but she accepted his thought for her with the same silence, though with a quickened gratitude.

"He's good as gold,—dear old Les," she thought as she made her way along the wood-road. "I'll tell him how good he is the next time I see him. I couldn't to-day."

Jack came upon her as she was entering the back drive. He did not seem to notice her red eyes and disturbed manner. He was full of news. "What do you think?" he bubbled. "Got an offer for Bony. A man saw him when John was exercising him just now and he wants to buy him. Isn't that fine and dandy? I told you that horse had blood.



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I bet when he's regularly in harness again, he'll be a crackerjack."

He halted, seeing all at once that something was amiss. Dropping her arm, he muttered something about having to attend to Bony's supper and went quickly off toward the stables.

Hilda could not risk another chance meeting. She hurried to her room by the back way and shut the door behind her. Her promise to Hal was going to be very hard to keep, with the picture of that grim, narrow bed among its bright surroundings and the wasted form of Hal with that strange dignity upon him.

She flung herself by her bed and buried her face in the cover. She must have her hour of mourning, though Hal had her promise.

She did not rise as twilight came on. She did not hear the sounds of normal life in the house about her, the telephone bell, the step on the stairs. She started at the knock on her door and rose stiffly, glad of the shadows that hid her disfigured face.

It was Jack and he spoke very gently. "I told Page you had a headache and wouldn't be down to dinner," he said. "She's all right. And—and someone just 'phoned over from MacAllisters'. It was Miss Jean, I think. She said he stayed on the terrace until the sun went down."

He disappeared very quickly. When it was

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quite dark he came again. "I've got the car out by the gate," he said. "You'd better come along. She'll want to see you, maybe, being's you're such chums."

Hilda was surprised, but she agreed quietly. She washed her face and smoothed her hair, putting on her hat mechanically before the mirror as she always did. The face that looked absently back at her was disfigured by grief but it was uplifted by a truer courage than in its happier moments. She had forgotten to think of herself now. Her whole mind was upon Jean and her sorrow. She wished to go to her, to give her that word as to the eternal things ——

## CHAPTER XIX

### RESPIRE

IN the week that followed Hilda had plenty of chance to put her resolution to the test.

Neither her mother nor Mrs. Bradford returned and her problem still hung unsolved. That called for much patience and a little courage, too. Waiting is sometimes harder than facing the guns. Her promise to Hal as to putting aside her grief for him was not easy, though Jean set her a brave example. Jean had laid out her own course on that last day when she was leaving for Cornwells.

“I’m going on just as he wanted us to,” she had said simply. “Just as if he were still over there doing service in his plane. I try to think that he’s only gone a bit higher up,—that the clouds are hiding him for only a little while. That helps. I’ll make that Course before October and I’m looking to you to keep your end of it. And don’t mope. It’s not fair.”

“But I can’t go on as if it hadn’t happened,” protested Hilda miserably. “It seems horrible to go about as usual, as though we didn’t miss him. People will think it strange, too.”



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“People!” repeated Jean scornfully. “Why care for people? If they don’t understand, they don’t matter. Crêpe veils and black borders don’t measure real grief,—that’s in the heart. I’m not afraid of forgetting Hal but I’m afraid of breaking my word to him.”

Hilda remembered her look long after she had gone and it helped her to go through her accustomed round of life with a brave front. She succeeded better perhaps because of Page’s need of cheery comradeship, and she felt responsible for Page. Her recovery was a matter of great moment to Hilda. With Page restored to health, those wretched bills paid, and a word of endorsement from Mr. Dalton, she knew that her first month’s patched accounts would pass muster.

Page was still kept in the long chair under the lindens the greater part of the sunny days but her rosy cheeks and bright eyes showed that she could hardly be counted a real invalid. Jack said she looked like a cold-cream advertisement and that was the highest praise he could muster.

As to Jack himself, he was the best help Hilda could have had. He seemed to understand, which was wonderful in a boy of his years. He spent hours with Page, although he much preferred the tennis courts at the club, and he did a hundred little unobtrusive acts of kindness which only Hilda saw.

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“And I thought him a young imp at first,” she confessed to Page when the latter was relating some of Jack’s funny stories. “I was so sure I knew better than Mother,” and she laughed merrily.

“Boys are mighty hard to understand, I reckon,” remarked Page. “It’s easier to form an opinion of grown folks, I think.”

“Oh, yes, a great deal easier,” agreed Hilda confidently. “It is for me, at any rate. I knew what you were the first moment. I’m not often mistaken about grown people. One can see what they are,—boys are never what they seem.”

Jack himself hurried up. He was laughing. “What do you think is the matter with Esther Marie?” he said. “She’s home and she’s been ’phoning to ask if you’ll be home next Friday. Next Friday, mind you,—a week almost. She seems sort of crazy to me. I told her I’d tell you and send her an engraved reply in the morning.”

Hilda turned in pleased surprise. “They’re home, then!” she exclaimed. “You’ll like them immensely, Page. Miss DuBois is the dearest little lady in the world. Esther Marie calls her Aunt Lavendar and that describes her. Esther Marie has to be seen to be appreciated.”

“She’s a red-headed spitfire and she’s stuck on Cousin Hilda,” Jack flung over his shoulder as he raced away. “Don’t let her fool you on that.”

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Hilda laughed as she rose. "He's set against her," she explained. "It began before they were introduced, as I told you. But you'll like her. She's really a dear girl. I'll run over to The Pines sometime to-day and ask them over to tea to-morrow. No, you needn't look vexed. You're one of the family now, and you simply must submit."

She walked away without waiting for any comment but when she turned to glance back, Page was actually smiling after her. A wave of amazement swept over her. "I believe she likes to meet people, after all," she marveled. "She was just pretending because she thought it was right." She gave a little chuckle. "Well, Miss Page Carter, you're grown up but there are a few things about you that remain to be seen," she thought, with amusement.

She intended stopping at The Pines on her way home from Mr. Dalton's, but she made some small household purchases on her way through town and decided to leave them with Martha before doing her errand at the large house. While she was in the hall the telephone bell rang and she stopped to answer it.

"The wanderer has returned," Mrs. Bradford's soft voice told her. "Are you ready to show the fruits of your labors?"

Hilda's heart leaped. Fate was kind after all.



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“ Oh, yes indeed! ” she cried eagerly. “ I’ll go over any time you say. The room is quite done and it looks lovely. When shall you want to go? ”

Mrs. Bradford hesitated. “ The rest of this afternoon is taken,” she replied with evident regret. “ And to-morrow afternoon also. How would the morning suit? ”

Hilda had to tell her that her lesson took her morning, and then a bright idea struck her. “ Why not come down to see Mr. Dalton’s tapestries while I am there? ” she asked. “ Then we might run out to Hampton before lunch if we are quick. ”

This suited perfectly and she hung up with a sigh of relief. Her perplexities were about to be solved,—the bills would be paid in a day at the utmost. The burden which she had tried to ignore but which had weighed heavily, dropped off and she was free. She decided to let her visit to The Pines wait and to go over her accounts very carefully once more. She would have everything in faultless shape for the morrow.

Martha halted her on her way out to the lindens. “ If you please, Miss Hilda, I’ll need that lettuce you promised to bring, if we’re to have salad; John’s off with that horse of Master Jack’s or he might go,” she said with a hint of reproach in her tone.

Hilda started. “ Didn’t I get the lettuce? ” she

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asked. "It must have been on the list. Well, I'll rush down and have it for you, Martha, in just two jumps."

She waved to Page as she went out. "It's the penalty for living out here in this lovely spot where there aren't any shops," she thought, but she did not care. Everything was rose-colored now. Her suspense was ended and the world was beautiful to her. She was ready to write to Elizabeth Landis that she was going to be ready for the opening of the office in October.

She raced to the shop and back in a glow of happy dreams. She saw nothing but glistening gold-lettered signs bearing the name of the firm, neat office fixtures and the businesslike trio who were at the head of affairs in that sanctum.

It was a glimpse of the group on the lawn that stopped her hurrying thoughts with a jolt of happiness.

"Mother! Oh, how simply gorgeous! She's come on that three-fifty and I never dreamed she'd be here to-day," she said ecstatically, steering in the back entrance with a rather uncertain hand.

She was out of the car and in her mother's arms in an instant. She felt that she had never known how dear a place those clinging arms could be, nor how sweet the touch of her mother's warm lips. She looked, starry-eyed, into her mother's glowing

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face. "Oh, but it's good to see you," she breathed. "I've been simply lost without you!"

Mrs. Hare looked deep into the upturned eyes, smiling her most tender smile. She did not speak, but there was no need for words. The moment was one of intense joy to each. The joy remained after the actual second of time had gone, and they were seated by Page's chair and the talk had begun briskly. Hilda felt the thrill of it while she listened to her mother's account of Aunt Alice's illness and the trip to Mount Clemens, while she herself told of the many happenings during her mother's absence, and while Jack and even Page joined in the talk, each adding their share to the eager chat.

It made her rather serious, though, as the shadows lengthened and the hour for going indoors to make ready for dinner drew on. She rose when her mother did, leaving Jack beside Page's chair, and she walked close beside her toward the house.

Her voice was just a bit husky as she said, in her direct fashion, "Mother, can you spare me a half hour? I shan't keep you longer than that."

Mrs. Hare glanced at her watch. "I think, my dear, that I'll beg off from business to-night," she said with a smile. "I think I know what you want, and am sure you are willing to wait. To-morrow will do, will it not?"



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Hilda was forced to say it would. On reflection she was rather glad of the respite. She remembered her engagement with Mrs. Bradford and concluded she would postpone the reckoning until after she had seen the owner of the lovely little room at Hampton.

When she joined the others in the dining-room she was her usual gay self again, and she was quite ready to tease Jack a bit, in friendly fashion, about his belief in his powers as a stage charmer.

He had been telling his Aunt Cynthia of his trip with the Williams' and naturally had not kept his success in the theatrical line wholly out of the picture. He took her laughing disbelief with his usual seriousness. "I'll show you all some day," he began with that determined wag of his head that was now so familiar. "I'll show ——"

Just what he was going to show them did not appear, for a form flashed past the windows, a step sounded in the entrance-hall and a voice cried eagerly behind Hilda:

"Oh, I'm so thankful to find you at home and entirely alive! I was perfectly certain that you must be quite shattered when I saw that chair and pillows out on the lawn!"

It was Esther Marie, of course.

She halted with a catching breath when she saw the others who were about to seat themselves at the

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table. A wave of vivid color swept over her face and she turned to Hilda with swift apology.

"I thought you were alone, you know, like you used to be," she explained in great embarrassment. "I never stopped to ask anyone about you. I just ran over the very moment I could get off. I ——"

"You came at the right moment, my dear," smiled Mrs. Hare. "We are debating a serious subject and we need an uneven number for voting. John will bring a plate and you must join us."

Her acceptance of Esther Marie as a matter of course was just the right thing. It was also the way to Esther Marie's impulsive yet discerning heart. She flashed a grateful look at Mrs. Hare as she answered with instant gratitude:

"Indeed, I should love to stop, Mrs. Hare,—for I know you *are* Mrs. Hare,—but I must go straight back. No one knows I am here and Miss DuBois will worry if I'm away long. Ever since my drowning, she worries when I'm away. I'll come over in the morning, if I may."

Hilda had an idea, inspired by her mother's tactful kindness. "Why not let me 'phone that you are here?" she said. "You must get better acquainted with Mother, now that she's home at last. And you haven't met Page, either. There are two perfectly good reasons for staying. We'll see that

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you're sent home before twilight, won't we, Mother? "

Esther Marie was plainly allured by this proposal but she waited for Mrs. Hare to endorse it before she gratefully agreed that it would be a wonderful plan. She sat down with a sigh of deep satisfaction in the chair next to Mrs. Hare which Jack quickly placed for her, and Hilda, as she went to telephone to The Pines, heard her say with great emphasis, "I little thought, Mrs. Hare, when I was rushing over here, that this was awaiting me!"

Hilda laughed to herself at the ardor of the speech but she liked it, nevertheless. It was so sincere. And she liked Esther Marie all the better for having fallen so ready a victim to her mother's charm.

She went back, after having Miss DuBois' assurances that it was very kind indeed of them to be so good to Esther Marie, and she found that young lady already very much at home in the little circle. She was rather quieter than usual, but her big eyes were shining and her cheeks flushed with pleasant excitement and she was listening to the merry chat between Mrs. Hare, Page and Jack with avid interest.

She told Hilda afterward that she had never been "really inside" of a nice family before. Most of the people she knew, she stated, were either stupid



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or liked other things,—by which she evidently meant things in which she herself had scant interest.

The meal was a very gay one, since each had many things to tell and it prolonged itself almost to the twilight hour when Esther Marie was vowed to departure. As they rose from the table, Jack surprised Hilda greatly by offering to take Esther Marie home. He had evidently gotten over his greatest aversion of her, although he plainly considered the duty of escorting this mere child,—and red-headed at that,—as a necessity, not a pleasure.

Esther Marie waited for Mrs. Hare to accept for her and then she added her own thanks. As they went off together, Jack rather stiff and patronizing, Hilda heard her vivid voice quite clearly.

“Then you’ll see my horrid snakes, too. You’ve never been over to get them, you know, though I offered them to you ages and ages ago.”

Jack’s reply was indistinct but it sounded indifferent.

Hilda smiled at her mother as they disappeared along the way to the wood-road. “Isn’t that just like a boy?” she said. “They snub the girls who’d be the best chums, and make little idiots of themselves over dolls like Janey Sloan,” and then, Page being gone to her room, she told her mother the story of the dress-clothes. “He’d never have got

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them in the world, except to dazzle Janey," she ended.

Mrs. Hare shook her head, laughing. "I wondered why he wrote so persistently," she said. "His Aunt Alice was surprised at his choice of a birthday gift, too. He's usually so given to comfort and old clothes."

"He's a dear, though, as you said, Mother," Hilda went on, growing more serious. She told her mother of his offer of money and his strenuous mornings with the lawn-mower.

Mrs. Hare listened attentively. She made little comment but asked many questions as to Jack's share in Page's hospital expenses.

"He did without sodas for an age, and that's the limit for him," Hilda wound up warmly. "He's a dear, and he's been a good chum to me. I'd never have really known him if I hadn't been in a corner like that."

Mrs. Hare agreed. She laid a warm hand on Hilda's across the summer-house table. "Sorrow often shows us more real beauty than joy ever can," she said thoughtfully, adding in another tone, "But why did you not tell me of your having rescued your young friend from a watery grave, as she puts it? I had not heard of it until she told me while you and Jack were helping Page up-stairs."

Hilda opened her eyes. "I forgot it," she con-

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fessed. "I thought I'd written you about it. It really wasn't anything to make a fuss over. Esther Marie is so terribly enthusiastic over little things!"

Mrs. Hare waited. "And this little thing—just how did it happen?" she asked lightly.

"I heard her call for help and I dived off the dam-breast at Mullen's," replied Hilda easily. "It was perfectly simple. I had kicked off my slippers in the car. My clothes were light and she was right there where I could get her. Annie helped pull her in and we had Betty's machine to rush her home. It was all over in a jiffy."

Mrs. Hare seemed satisfied with this brief account of the disaster, and to Hilda's relief nothing more was said on the subject. Jack came home from The Pines after an extended absence and his talk for the rest of the evening veered constantly toward the habits of harmless snakes. He went to bed early, saying he had something to do before breakfast and must get ready for it.

Hilda went up-stairs in a hopeful frame of mind. Her mother had come back at exactly the right moment. At luncheon to-morrow she intended to ask for the important interview.

"I'll have the money and perhaps I'll have had time to slip down to pay before I come home," she thought. "It is lucky Mother doesn't want the car in the morning."



## CHAPTER XX

### JACK'S MASQUERADE

MR. DALTON rubbed his nose reflectively. "Bring her by all means," he agreed cordially. "Telephone to her now,—we are here and ready,—and ask her to come at once." He added, smiling at Hilda's eager acceptance, "I don't promise to show those pieces in the alcove, mind you. They are only for the elect. I don't show them to everyone."

Hilda was delighted. She liked things to move rapidly. She went to the telephone on the side table with a gratified feeling that she was one of Mr. Dalton's elect,—for had he not shown her the priceless old tapestries of the alcove with their faded landscapes and their queer impressive figures? Yes, not once, but a number of times until she now was quite familiar with them.

"She will be here in half an hour," she reported. "She's always prompt, so we can expect her on time. I think you'll admire her very much, for she's quite the loveliest person I've seen for ages."

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He stroked his smooth beard, chuckling softly. "No doubt she will be an agreeable object, an harmonious human object among my tapestries," he returned, "but don't expect me to share your enthusiasms, young lady. I've seen too many wonderful works of art to be captivated easily by human beings,—however lovely."

His lenient tone made Hilda feel quite a little girl. She did not mind it, however; she knew she should have her enjoyment in watching his admiration for Mrs. Bradford grow under her eyes when that graceful lady should arrive. She looked at the clock impatiently, wishing the half hour gone.

Mrs. Bradford did not keep them waiting quite the full time. Five minutes before the clock hands showed the appointed time, there was the rustle of draperies, a sound of footfalls on the soft rugs, and the man announced, "Mrs. Bradford."

She came in with her face alight and the most beautiful expectant expression,—not too eager, and yet intensely interested. Hilda thought she had never seen her look so charming. She was wearing one of her lovely clinging gowns of violet and white and a wide thin hat cast a slight shadow over her perfect face.

"It is wonderfully good of you to allow me to see your treasures," she told Mr. Dalton, as the introductions were made and Hilda subsided

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slightly into the background, wishing to watch the effect her friend would produce.

Mr. Dalton bowed in his fine manner and assured Mrs. Bradford that it was always a great bit of good fortune to share any treasure with those who had eyes. Hilda could see that he was rather more impressed than he had thought to be.

She smiled to herself as they went to the inner room where the tapestries were kept. "He's finding that I didn't exaggerate a bit," she thought. "He finds that she's something more than a harmonious human object, I believe."

She smiled still more when she saw how completely the other two seemed to forget her. They talked earnestly of weaves and patterns, and if Mrs. Bradford made some few mistakes now and again, it was hardly noted in the flow of eager talk. Mr. Dalton did not unveil the alcove, however.

He had his hand on the shrouding curtains and Hilda knew he would switch on the light before he drew back the curtain. She waited in pleasant anticipation of the moment. But the moment never came.

As he raised his hand toward the button, a movement of Mrs. Bradford's seemed to arrest his arm. He turned sharply to her, as she stood in the middle of the room, her head in profile to him while her eyes rested on the great bees in the border



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of the ancient tapestry work on the opposite wall.

“Surely I’ve seen you somewhere, Mrs. Bradford,” he said quite suddenly. “I’m quite positive that I have seen you before. I recall just that tilt of the head—yes, undoubtedly I have seen you,—but where?”

Mrs. Bradford had started ever so slightly and Hilda saw with concern that she looked pale under the light of the ceiling lamps,—she really grew quite white,—it was only for the fraction of a second, however, and she was herself again as she turned to Mr. Dalton with mild surprise.

“Indeed, I can’t recall any meeting,” she said with a tone of regret. “I think it must be someone else. If I had met you before I am certain that I should remember it,—you are not at all the usual man one meets everywhere.”

The deft touch of flattery expressed such honest admiration for the impressive, cultured owner of the tapestries that Hilda found it very acceptable. Mr. Dalton was not the sort of man one met every day. He was a distinguished figure in any situation,—Hilda had realized that the first time she saw him. She felt that Mrs. Bradford had said a very true and very agreeable thing.

But Mr. Dalton paid no attention to the phrase. He stood with the folds of the curtain in his fingers,

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frowning a little to recall the varied pictures of the past. He looked at Mrs. Bradford with searching, kind eyes. "I can't recall it just now, but it will come to me," he said slowly. "It will come to me. I never forget a face. And there's some association with your face, Mrs. Bradford, that makes me anxious to place you. I don't know what it is at this moment, but I feel that it's something rather interesting. Yes, I shall be glad to have it come back."

Mrs. Bradford smiled graciously. "I shall look forward with much interest," she began, and then she gave a little exclamation of dismay as the clock in the corner of the room chimed softly, one stroke after another, announcing noon. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said with much regret in her voice. "I simply cannot stop a moment longer. I am overdue at an important appointment. Will you ever forgive me for running away at this time? I assure you I should not do it if the matter were not of grave importance."

She held out her hand in farewell as she spoke, and Hilda, forgetting for the moment her own important engagement with the lady, saw that Mr. Dalton took her explanation in good part.

"The tapestries will wait your leisure," he returned in his most courteous manner. "I should be the last person in the world to want to defer an

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important business affair. We shall only postpone the pleasure." He evidently thought the more highly of his visitor that she should recall and keep her engagement when occupied with more agreeable matters.

The regrets and farewells were gracefully said by Mrs. Bradford and with a last appreciative glance at the whole room, she went out, ushered by the man-servant who waited always in the hall.

Hilda turned eagerly to Mr. Dalton. "Isn't she as lovely as I said?" she asked.

"Quite, quite so," he replied heartily. And then the puzzled look came back to his face. "But I shall remember where I saw that face. It's just on the edge of my mind,—it will soon come back."

Hilda had time to remember her own appointment and to feel sharp regret as she gathered up her books and papers. She was at the door when she was called back. It was Mrs. Bradford's soft voice on the telephone assuring her that she would keep her engagement later in the day. "I'll 'phone you as soon as I have a moment," she promised, and Hilda's sky cleared again.

After luncheon nothing was said by her mother about the account books and Hilda was only too glad to keep silent. Miss DuBois had sent word in a polite little note that she would waive ceremony and come over about four o'clock to meet



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Miss Hilda's mother. Esther Marie had added a postscript.

“Aunty Lavendar thinks I am a wild Indian for wanting it, but will you please, please come over with us afterward? I want you,—you alone, to see my rooms. I have a particular reason for wanting it. Always, E. M. P. P. S. Miss Page, too, of course.”

This put the account books further in the background and Mrs. Hare's willingness to do whatever the rest wanted, disposed of the afternoon to the very last moment. Miss DuBois and her young charge arrived promptly at four and after a happy hour together under the lindens,—an hour in which they all got marvelously well acquainted,—the big limousine took them all, excepting Jack who had disappeared early, over to The Pines.

Hilda was rather surprised and a little disappointed to find nothing very wonderful in Esther Marie's three big rooms, when she was secretly ushered up to them while the others looked at some rare prints in the drawing-room. The cage with the thrush and the new Martha Washington rug both seemed out of place, though Esther Marie beamed with delight in them. Her manner was odder than Hilda had seen it. She walked about the rooms each in turn, talking of their stupid old

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furniture and then suddenly switching the subject to her gratitude to Hilda. Altogether the secret expedition failed to come up to Esther Marie's postscript. It was rather flat and tame.

Mrs. Hare parted from Miss DuBois with genuine friendliness and Page seemed to regret leaving the dear little old lady. "She's mighty like an aunty of mine who died four years ago," she said as they drove home through the gathering dusk. She seemed somewhat tired from her first trip abroad and went directly to her room when they reached Grey Cot.

John halted Mrs. Hare in the hall. "If you please, Mrs. Hare, the telephone's been asking for you for half an hour. I thought you'd be in soon, so I let them wait."

As he went out Mrs. Hare took up the receiver. In the silence of the hall the gruff tones were clear to Hilda.

"I want Mrs. Philip Hare and I want her quick!"

Hilda and her mother exchanged glances, as Mrs. Hare replied.

The gruff voice went on. "You're wanted at Police Station Number 10, Mrs. Hare. We've got Miss Hare here. She's been arrested for speeding and she wants you to fix it up for her. Station Number 10, and be quick, if you please."

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The receiver clicked shut with a snap. They looked at each other in amazement. Mrs. Hare rose briskly. "They've probably made some mistake in the name, but the simplest way will be to get in the car and run down. It might be one of the girls, Alice or Janey,—who wanted to keep the matter quiet."

Hilda agreed and they hurried off leaving a message for Page if she should come down before their return.

It was not until they were on the threshold of the Police Station and were actually stepping inside the unattractive, orderly room that the solution of the puzzle flashed on Hilda's unbelieving eyes. She gave a gulp of irrepressible laughter. "Oh, o-o-oh!" she gurgled. "How did he ever——"

At the far end of the room sat a strangely familiar figure.

It was one that Hilda had often see in her mirror when she prepared to go on errands. It wore a linen motor suit and had its hat tilted at a becoming angle on its straight light hair. Its nose was likewise tilted at an angle like Hilda's own nose; only its queer light eyes betrayed it.

"Jack!" she cried in a burst of merriment, running to him and laying a hand on the linen shoulder. "How in the world could you do it so well? I——"



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One of the burly policemen who guarded each side of the prisoner raised his hand in protest. "Sorry, lady, but you'll have to fix it up with the Sergeant at the desk there. This here prisoner ain't to be tampered with."

Hilda left that part of the affair to her mother and she did not move, although she took her hand away. She stood looking down at Jack, who after the first glance, cast his eyes down and refused to return her gaze, and she laughed silently at the modest figure of the sham Miss Hare between the two stout guardians. Her amusement seemed to irritate the men.

"She looks mild enough, but she's got muscle, I can tell you," grumbled the fatter one, speaking to the air. "She caught me a crack in the ribs with her elbow that I won't forget in a hurry."

"Tried to pass herself off for someone else, too," muttered the other. "But I'd seen her picture in the paper in that very rig in the photo section, and I knew she was the Hare girl. No foolin' your Uncle Dudley!"

Jack flashed a look up at that and remarked in a perfectly girlish voice, "These horrid men don't know how to treat a young lady at all, Cousin Hilda."

Hilda could not keep in her laughter. The imi-

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tation young lady was so absolutely real to eye and ear. "You win, Jack," she said. "I'll believe your tales about the Williams' play after this. You could fool anybody,—even me. How *can* you do it?"

Her enjoyment of Jack's cleverness was cut short by the man at the desk, who motioned to the officers to bring the prisoner nearer.

It took some time to adjust the matter. Mrs. Hare had to ask Jack to remove the light wig that gave him such a remarkable resemblance to Hilda and then to explain the reason for the masquerade. She also suggested that the affair be kept from the papers; and after some discussion it was happily disposed of.

Mrs. Hare gravely motioned to Jack, in the hired roadster in which he had been arrested, to take the lead, while she and Hilda followed in the four-some. Not much was said on the way home, as Hilda saw that her mother was deeply disturbed. She herself could see only fun in the incident, and she bubbled over more than once, quickly subduing her amusement, however, out of deference to her mother's grave face.

Page was still up-stairs and the trio made their way indoors unseen and halted in the library, where Mrs. Hare turned to Jack with a stern look in her fine eyes.

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"And now, Jack, I shall ask you why you chose to impersonate Hilda, running the risk of bringing her name into undesirable prominence?"

Jack, with his wig under his arm and his dark hair very much mussed, was a rather funny figure. He looked very uncomfortable, but his gaze was clear and steady as he met his aunt's reproachful eyes.

"I never thought of getting Cousin Hilda into anything, honest I didn't, Aunt Cynthia," he replied with convincing emphasis. "I only thought about proving I could act like a girl. I thought I'd do it and then she'd see. It all came up so suddenly. I didn't think of it until after I answered the 'phone."

"Who ——" broke in Hilda, but Mrs. Hare motioned her to silence.

"We will let Jack tell his story as he wishes," she said quietly.

Jack went on, wrinkling his forehead in the effort to recall precisely the order of events. "Mrs. Bradford thought I was Cousin Hilda and she said she'd found she could get off after all. She said she was ready to keep her engagement this afternoon."

He stopped to gather memory and then went on with growing confidence, while they listened intently.



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“When she said that, it came into my head that here was the chance to show that I could fool anyone. I knew if Mrs. Bradford took me for Cousin Hilda after all the time she'd known her, you'd all believe me about the play. So I just tried to talk like Cousin Hilda, and said I'd be over right away. And then I scooted down to Sear's, got the machine and got the wig, and came back here and dressed without anyone seeing me. It was easy. Mrs. Bradford never knew the difference. I'd have pulled it off all right if it hadn't been for that big stiff of a traffic cop just by the Matthews' Plant,—he's too particular for words. He scooted after us, just when I put on a bit of gas to get the lady over to the apartment in a hurry. She was talking a lot of stuff I didn't understand about curtains and rugs and all that, and I wanted to get her off my hands.”

Hilda's exclamation passed unheeded, and she was glad it did. This was no time to reveal her schemes for decorative fame.

Jack went on without a pause. “The cop whistled and she clutched my arm like fury,—she seemed awfully scary,—just as though she thought the cop might shoot us. He wasn't going to do a thing, except scare us a bit. I knew that. But she got all upset over it and asked me to hurry back to town. So, as soon as we got around the second

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corner I put on the gas and we just moved. I guess you know the rest."

Mrs. Hare looked puzzled. "But Mrs. Bradford—what became of her? Nothing was said of her at the Police Station."

"Oh, she slipped off when the fat fellow pinched me," he explained easily. "The top was up and he didn't seem to see whether there were two or a dozen in the machine. I slowed down at the corner where some people were waiting for the trolley and she was off before he came up. I was mighty glad of it. Didn't want to get any of your friends in a scrape, you know."

Mrs. Hare looked rather relieved as the story ended, although her voice was still grave as she told Jack to go up and change his borrowed clothes for his own as quickly as he could and to say nothing of the affair to anyone.

Jack went willingly enough. He halted at the landing, however, to look down. "Come on up, Cousin Hilda, and help with the obsequies," he called.

There was a compelling tone in his careless invitation that reached an anxious place in Hilda's brain. She ran lightly up the stairs after him and followed him into his spacious airy room.

As soon as they faced each other, his careless manner dropped from him. "That Mrs. Brad-

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ford," he began abruptly, "she's seemed queer to me, talked of being so much indebted to you. What did she mean? You aren't in any more secret scrapes, helping the needy, are you?"

Hilda could not help smiling at his paternal air. "No, my infant," she assured him kindly. "It isn't a scrape at all,—it's just business."

Jack stared. "I wouldn't do business with a woman, unless I knew her pretty well," he began doubtfully.

Hilda's laughter put him to confusion. "Well, anyway, I'd see that I knew who she was right quick," he insisted. "She talked as though you were spending money on her, and I happen to know that you haven't any spare change at the present moment. Won't you tell me what she meant?"

"No, I won't, because I can't just now," returned Hilda, touched by the genuine concern in his face and voice. "It's all right, Jackie boy. You'll hear all about it later on. It's just business, as I said. You'd better hurry into your own clothes now, or you'll be late for dinner."

She went smiling down-stairs to her room for her own preparations. The whole affair was very funny to her. And yet, as she dressed, a dim foreboding that Jack's warning might have some sense in it made her vaguely uneasy. Since her mother's return she had begun to lose the fine edge of her



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glowing admiration of Mrs. Bradford. It might have been the satisfaction in the happiness of a united circle, or it might have been that the absolute sincerity of Mrs. Hare's lovely face made that other lovely face seem a shade less attractive.

"I'll call her up on the 'phone and explain the best I can, and I'll take the bills over to her in the morning," she decided as she stood by the open window staring out into the starlit night. Soft summer sounds of insect and drowsy stirring bird came to her among the murmured drone of the leafy branches; the Milky Way gleamed across the darkling sky, a web of magic beauty. She felt the peace of the brooding summer night enter her heart. The haunting little shadow dimmed and faded.

Suddenly she laughed at the memory of Jack at the Police Station. "He won the wager, after all," she said. "He certainly did look exactly like a girl in those clothes."

## CHAPTER XXI

### PROFIT AND LOSS

MR. DALTON, in the midst of a talk on wall-surfaces, stopped abruptly and put down his pencil. "I've got it," he said, and then shook his head. "But, oh, it couldn't be—that was at Belmont, South Carolina—and she was a Mrs. Drew—no, it can't be."

Then he chewed his beard as he did when disturbed and added slowly, "It is the same face, the same profile ——"

Hilda could get no more from him than that, but it set her wondering.

She had to stop at Harkin's on her way to the Ardsmore,—she had told Mrs. Bradford she would be over to see her about half-after eleven,—and it was there in the oriental department that she got a decided shock. The clerk from the credit department did not see Hilda behind the stand full of silken garments and his tone was crisp with annoyance.

"That bill for the Ardsmore has come back," he said in a sharp tone. "Check returned from the bank. Don't sell any more to that party until we

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find out what's up. Don't be too clumsy about it, nothing she might take offense at—only no more oriental goods for that account.”

The clerk stared and grinned,—it was an everyday matter to him. “I know, the one who gets those flowered kimonos, lavender-and-white with the wisteria and had the monogram put on them,” he replied cheerfully. “I'll see to it.”

Hilda heard with horror. She could not believe her own ears. Mrs. Bradford had shown her two lavender kimonos with the same decorations!

She went hastily over to the Ardsmore, only to find that Mrs. Bradford had left the night before to be gone a few days. She made very sure that the clerk expected her back. He told her that the lady had left her rooms just as they were, trunks and all, so it was certain she would return.

Some uneasy feeling, made stronger by the memory of Jack's words, kept her from going straight home. She got in the trolley for Northwood, the suburb where the Row was located, and went to the clerk for her key. He handed it to her with a smile. “You folks in Number Fourteen are getting busy these days. Mrs. Bradford was out here last night, they tell me, with a big seven-passenger car.”

“Oh, she must be moving in after all,” exclaimed Hilda without thinking.



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“Well, no, not exactly,” the man answered cheerfully. “She took a lot of stuff out with her, I hear,—was going to change some of the goods that were sent here by mistake.”

Hilda did not need the key to realize that her dreams were shattered. Nevertheless, she went up to the little room and stood staring at the wreck of so much happy hope and willing service. The paper, the furniture, and the two pictures were still there, but all else was gone. The filmy curtains, the rich hangings, the fine rugs, the lovely cushions, all were gone. The little ivory figure which had been her crowning extravagance had disappeared with the rest and, strange to say, it was this that proved the straw for Hilda.

She sat down in the deep soft armchair by the hearth and clinched her hands beneath her chin. She would not weep, she would not cry out,—it went too deep for that; she simply sat very tense and still, hating Mrs. Bradford as she had never hated anyone in all her serene, sheltered life.

After a while she sat up very straight, and drew in a deep hard breath. She opened her bag and took out the little sheaf of bills,—the handwriting on the wall of her castle of dreams!

“It’ll take me months to pay them, but I’ll clear off every cent,” she said fiercely. “It doesn’t make any difference who has the stuff, I bought it and I’ll

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have to pay. I'll lose the partnership, of course, and I'll break my word to Hal, but it's too late to change that now. The one thing that's to be done is to pay these bills."

She got up and moved restlessly about. She dreaded going home. She shrank from meeting her mother. Her hatred of Mrs. Bradford had changed into a loathing of herself. If she had only not been so sure of her own opinion! If she had only had sense enough to confess the first moment of her mother's home-coming! "I was so abominably sure of myself," she said bitterly. "So clever and businesslike and able to take care of myself! That burnt jam hasn't taught me a thing."

As she walked back and forth this passionate disgust of herself faded to give place to another mood. She halted and faced about as at a command. She was answering the call of her conscience. The anger faded from her face and the light of a steady purpose dawned there. She looked very tired, very sad, but she looked straight ahead.

"I'll go down to the stores and tell them I shall have to make them wait for most of the bills," she said firmly, "and then I'll go home and tell Mother every last thing about it. I can't be in the partnership, but I can be something better than a sniffing coward. I'll take my medicine, no matter how much it hurts."

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She made her rounds and felt somewhat comforted by the courteous way her brief statements were received. She went home then, knowing that she was very late for luncheon and rather hoping the others might have left the dining-room.

They were there, however, all talking excitedly. Page looked up with shining eyes as Hilda entered, but it was Jack who told her what they were discussing.

"Aunt Cynthia says that Page's bank ought to pay her part of her money back," he said jubilantly. "She's been finding out about it this morning and she says it's going to be all right. Page will get some of her cash, sure as shooting."

Hilda had thought herself beyond gladness, but she was genuinely glad. She stopped to drop a kiss on Page's dimpled cheek and, with an arm about her, told her how splendid it was to hear such good news. She was able to sit among them and eat some lunch and to her surprise she found that she was actually very hungry after the emotions of the morning.

Page halted her as she was going to her room.

"I suppose if I'd been different,—more experienced,—I'd have known about such things," she said wistfully. "But when Mr. Aiman wrote me that the bank had failed and he could send me no more money, I just wrote back that I was sorry but



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not to distress himself about it. I felt so sorry for him, knowing how anyone would feel about losing other people's money."

Hilda smiled rather grimly. "Some people don't care about that," she returned. "It's fine, though, that there's a chance of you getting your money."

"It would be mighty nice," answered Page dubiously, "but,—now don't laugh, Hilda,—but I saw a white cat the first thing this morning, and white cats before breakfast are mighty bad luck."

"Oh, you little goose!" cried Hilda in derision. "Do you really think a white cat could make any difference? If God means your good fortune to come to you all the cats in the world couldn't hinder. What did that owl on your sill at the Marta-Marie amount to?"

"Well, I was sick afterward, wasn't I?" asked Page, bewildered by this attack on old traditions. "And Carter certainly was ill."

"Pooh, you saw the owl after you had your bad news, remember that," persisted Hilda, now very much in earnest. "And your illness came a good while afterward. Anyway, how can you blame a poor innocent bird for what happens to human beings? It seems sort of lack of faith to me. I think *you* were the owl. If you'd had your eyes open, you might have had your money and been quite

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comfortable and not worked yourself into pneumonia in the horrid old store."

"I reckon you're right," Page confessed thoughtfully. "I never thought of it that way before. You see, we southern folks certainly do naturally turn to signs and omens. It's in our blood, I reckon. It never seemed silly to me before, but when you talk like that, it certainly does appear mighty childish."

"Does Carter tremble at a white cat before breakfast, or put on crape for an owl at night?" asked Hilda.

Page looked surprised. "Carter?" she echoed. "Oh, no, indeed. Gentlemen are mighty different, you know. He just laughs at me."

"Well, you follow Carter's example after this and you'll be happier," advised Hilda briskly. "Owls and unlucky pussies are pure, sheer barbarism and you are living in this twentieth century with wireless telegraphy and talking-machines and airships. With a brother in a good business, you just don't dare to be superstitious any longer."

"Very well, Hilda, I reckon you're right," replied Page so meekly that Hilda simply had to kiss her.

"You're a perfect dear, owls or no owls," she declared. "And now I must go on up-stairs. I want to see Mother before she goes out."

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She started off bravely but she was halted again by Jack. He was looking very odd. He had the afternoon paper stuffed in his coat pocket. He drew Hilda out to the summer-house before he would speak.

"I've seen all about her," he said without looking at Hilda. "It's in the paper here. She's played the same game in lots of cities. She got off with some jewelry she had sent on approval. Sounds like a regular thriller, doesn't it? I never thought I'd drive about with a famous lady-burglar like that. I don't wonder she was scared stiff when the traffic cop held us up last night."

Hilda knew he was talking volubly to give her time to recover from the shock. She laid a hand on his arm. "Jack, dear," she said very seriously, "I knew about it this morning. That is, I knew of part of it. You were right about trusting a strange woman."

He interrupted her anxiously. "Then it was true that you'd been letting yourself in for her?" he asked quickly. "Cousin Hilda, please tell me if you spent much on her. Have you overdrawn again?"

Hilda nodded. She could not speak.

He whistled softly. "Jiminy!" was all he said, but it held a world of compassion. He frowned



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and then added briskly, "You wait here a minute, will you?"

He returned in another minute leading his treasured Bonaparte. Hilda was puzzled, but she tried to enter into his scheme, whatever it might be.

"How fine he looks," she said. "He's better and better every day."

Jack wagged his head triumphantly as he surveyed Bonaparte. "I told you he had blood!" he bragged.

Bonaparte might never be as remarkable as his owner thought him, but he did present a very good appearance with his coat shining and his hoofs well blackened and a new russet halter on his intelligent head. It was impossible to believe that he was the same animal as the forlorn wreck Jack had led into the drive that day in July.

"I've had an offer for him to-day," Jack explained. "I haven't told anyone. But I know what I'm going to do about it. I'm going to sell him and make you take the money to make up your accounts. You've got to take it, no matter what you say. It mayn't be much, but it'll help. And I've got some more saved,—just in case it was needed. You've got to take that, too. You can't drop out and leave that Jean-girl alone. You can't, Cousin Hilda, and you know it."

He was red from earnestness and embarrass-

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ment. He held Bonaparte's halter with a nervous grasp, frowning at her in his effort to make her see the matter as he did. "You can't drop out, you know," he added.

Hilda's eyes were full of tears. She put a hand on his arm. "You're very good to me, Jack," she answered earnestly. "I'll never, never forget it. But you can't help me this time. This is something I've got to stand up to alone, don't you see? I've made a mess of things again and I'm the only one who can pay."

She saw by his gloomy look that he understood. He would not speak, but merely nodded and turned to take his rejected offering back to the stall. Hilda halted him with a gesture. "Please give me the paper," she said gently. "I'm sorry, Jack, but you see how it is."

He gave her the folded sheet and she stopped in the summer-house to spread it on the table. She grew pale as she saw the flaring caption: "Fascinating Lady Raffles Fools Society Friends," and her heart sank as she read. It was too grimy a tale of fraud and intrigue to associate with her charming Mrs. Bradford, but there was no denying the printed facts. Every detail of the last two years that had been available was flared out in merciless exactness. Hilda saw the name of Belmont, South Carolina, in the list.





PAGE HELD OUT A LETTER WITH A BUSINESS HEADING





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She shuddered at the thought of the arrest and exposure in the city where Mrs. Bradford had fled over night. All her anger was gone and she felt only a sick regret and sadness. "She was so clever and might have done so much good," she thought, folding the paper. "She worked pretty hard, too. It certainly didn't pay."

She felt suddenly almost happy. Her own burden seemed to lighten beside the load of guilt under which Mrs. Bradford had sunk. She held her head high as she walked. She was very thankful for her own easy path.

Page and Mrs. Hare were in the hall, and Page's glowing face made her pause. In reply to her look Page held out a letter, with a business heading.

"He wants me to come down to Rio as soon as I can," she said. "Oh, Hilda, he's getting on wonderfully. It's like magic, isn't it? He's only been in the firm two weeks and he wants me to come down!"

Hilda stopped to pat Page's shoulder. "It's the magic of plain every-day saving, I suppose," she smiled back. "Don't you see,—now he's in the firm he doesn't have to strip himself of every cent. He's back to normal again."

"I've been telling Page that she ought to have some of her money back before she has to tell Carter of her hard times," Mrs. Hare said, looking up

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from her own mail. "Mr. Langdon said this morning that the bank would pay one-third in about a fortnight. That would be worth waiting an extra week for, wouldn't it, Page? She wanted to go right off on the next steamer," she added, laughing at Page's expression.

"I reckon you're right, Mrs. Hare, but two weeks is a mighty long time to wait,—when you've been waiting a right smart bit already," confessed Page. "I'll write Carter that I'll take the first boat after Friday week. That'll settle it," and she disappeared into the library, radiant in her recovered joy.

Hilda tore open Jean's note as she went toward the stairs. "She'll be here this afternoon," she told her mother in surprise. "She says she decided to come home this week-end and that she's got another promise of some work for us,—for the partnership." She stopped abruptly, thrusting the note inside the paper which she still held. "Mother, will you come up and see my accounts? I'd rather have things settled before Jean gets here. She's coming about four."

She heard her mother's assent and she went upstairs to her desk and took out her books and the sheaf of bills. All her grief for her failure swept over her again. She sat down before the desk with a cold hard lump in her throat. She looked back



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over the past weeks and hated herself again for her weakness.

“If I’d only not felt so cocksure of myself,” she groaned, flattening the crumpled pile of bills with the palm of one cold hand. She knew at this final moment what she had lost, how much it meant to her, and why she had lost it. “I was so everlastingly eager to do it all myself,” she thought. “I’d have been all right now if I’d told Mother or Jean—oh, I know it, now that I’ve lost everything!”

She got up and walked to the window. The lovely peaceful scene stabbed her with memories. In the summer-house she had drawn most of the plans for the little room at Hampton Row; the fender of the blue foursome showing from the open garage spoke of those trips with Mrs. Bradford and without her to Hampton, to the shops; the chairs under the lindens reminded her of Captain Mulford’s visit. She turned away. The pain was too poignant to be borne.

As she walked restlessly about she heard her mother’s voice below talking to someone over the telephone. She halted for a moment and heard the last sentences. A pang of dismay shot along her tingling nerves.

“Oh, why did she say we’d be glad to see them this afternoon?” she murmured. “She might have known I couldn’t care for anything to-day. And

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Mr. Skelton, too! I shouldn't mind Miss DuBois and Esther Marie quite so much, but he's a perfect stranger. Oh, why did she let them come?"

It seemed to her in her moment of keen misery as though she could not endure the ordeal before her. The partnership had never seemed so dear to her as in this hour when she fully realized she had lost it. The memory of the back terrace with Hal's narrow bed among the flowers came to her. Her promise had been broken almost as soon as given.

She started at the sound of her mother's footsteps. She would not play the coward before others, no matter how agonized when alone. The very hopelessness of her case called for a brave front. She would not seek sympathy where she deserved blame.

She went to her desk and took up the sheaf of bills. Her face was rather pale but her eyes were steady. She was ready for the ordeal.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE VERDICT

“You see I’ve burnt my jam,” said Hilda bravely, “to a crisp.

“Money isn’t such a contemptibly unimportant matter after all,” she added. “It hasn’t been so pitifully easy as I expected it to be.”

It was a bitter moment. A memory of her gay boast of two months before came to her. The odor of burnt jam was again in her nostrils as she faced her mother with pallid lips.

“You won’t find anything wrong with the books for last month, but there is something that I did not put down,—something that makes all the rest count for nothing,” she began resolutely.

She did not spare herself. She told the whole story relentlessly. She made no mention of her promise to Hal. She did not want to buy forgiveness even for the sake of that sacred promise. She laid the bills, which she held in her trembling hands, on the desk beside the account books.

“I don’t expect to have my failure overlooked,” she ended in the same firm tone. “I shall have to



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take the rest of this month's money to pay on these bills,—the store people have agreed to wait for the rest. I shall pay every cent myself, of course."

"Your books are very neat," said Mrs. Hare absently.

Hilda saw she wished to soften the blow, so she spoke quickly. "I've lost the partnership, of course, and it's my own fault. I don't expect you to help pay for my idiocy. I've figured it out and I can have everything settled up in ——"

The sound of voices in the hall below made them both start. Mrs. Hare rose and went to the door while Hilda stood where she was, her fingers on the little pile of bills and her lips open to finish her sentence.

"It's the people from The Pines," said Mrs. Hare in surprise. "They are early, surely. I understood them to say four o'clock. Well, my dear, there's nothing for it. We must go down,—or at least, I will go, while you slip into another frock. We'll be in the breakfast-room. It looks too much like rain to have tea out-of-doors to-day."

Hilda's heart sank. She preferred instant execution to lingering tortures. She hurried about her dressing with the cold certainty of defeat heavy upon her. No matter how she tried to pretend, she could not deceive herself,—the partnership meant everything to her, and it was lost forever!

## THE VERDICT

“ May I come up? ” cried Esther Marie’s voice in the hall.

Hilda swallowed the lump in her throat and called as gaily as she could, and Esther Marie stood on the threshold.

“ I feel that I shall expire if I wait any longer,” she said breathlessly. “ I made them come earlier for I wanted you to talk to Father before anyone else happened in. I’ve been so anxious about it.”

Hilda snapped the last fastening of her sash and then raised her head, smiling. “ What terrible problem is gnawing at your heart now? ” she asked lightly. Esther Marie’s tremendous mysteries were always amusing.

“ It’s about my birthday present,” began her young friend. “ I’ve had such a time deciding.”

Hilda sat down on the window-seat, holding out a hand. “ Come and confess,” she urged gaily. “ Better keep them waiting down-stairs than to expire in their arms. What’s the matter with your birthday present? ”

Esther Marie took the extended hand shyly, for she was not given to demonstrations. She sat down close to Hilda, looking straight at her with her clear, serious hazel eyes.

“ I prefer to wait until I know what you will say about it,” she replied gravely. “ I suppose there’ll be something wrong about it,—though I could not

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for the life of me find a flaw in it till now." Then she puckered her brow as for a great confession, but all she said was, "You saved my life, you know."

"Is that all you have to tell me?" said Hilda, amused. "That's past history."

Esther Marie stiffened and dropped her hand.

"I merely mentioned it because I always think it when I look at you. You did, you know, from a watery ——" but she did not finish. Instead, she changed her tone to one of intense eagerness. "I've made up my mind about my birthday present. And Aunt Lavendar says it's all right. And Father says it's all right. Now I've come over to you to hear you say it's all right."

"I?" asked Hilda, rather startled. "But I haven't anything to do with it, Esther Marie. If your father and Miss DuBois ——"

Esther Marie stopped her with an imperious gesture. "You have everything to do with it," she declared firmly.

"But ——" began Hilda again.

Again Esther Marie halted her with the imperious gesture. "Wait," she commanded in great agitation. "You have everything to say about it, for you'll have to do it. Father says I may have my real, grown-up rooms, now that I'm fourteen,—a whole set of them to myself, and I've chosen those three south rooms on the second floor



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that you saw, and I'm going to get you to design them, paper, rugs, furniture, *everything!*"

Hilda was too surprised to speak.

Esther Marie flew at her with the energy of despair,—she thought the pause meant refusal. "Don't tell me you won't do it! I saw that sketch you made for a duckie little room in nice brown-red bloomy tones, and I'm just crazy to have my sitting-room like that."

Hilda's heart gave a great throb and then fell.

"I'd love to do it for you," she replied quietly, "but I don't believe I can. I'm not going to do much of that sort of thing after this. Hark, there's someone coming in. We'll have to go down," and she rose, still with the other's hand in hers, and went quickly to the hallway.

Esther Marie submitted silently. It was only when they were at the threshold of the breakfast-room that she spoke. "Your mother said you would do it for me," she announced in a small cold voice. "I shouldn't have asked you if it hadn't been quite all right."

She dropped Hilda's arm and walked stiffly to the group at the tea-table. Hilda would have followed her if her arm had not been touched by Jean, who was standing near talking with Jack, who moved off to join Esther Marie. Jean smiled after him. "He's forgotten he ever dressed up for

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Janey Sloan, hasn't he? Been bragging up little Miss Goldtop's collections for ten whole minutes. He doesn't seem to despise her as you said he did at first."

"He's really the dearest thing in the world, and those two are great cronies," Hilda answered, taking Jean's silently extended hand. "To have seen them at first glaring at each other over that kitten you'd never have believed that they'd come to be such good friends. It certainly is strange how things come about."

Jean nodded. "Everything is on the move," she admitted in her genial drawl. Her face showed the grief that was with her but her manner never changed. "We'll be hauling out of private life into our business careers before so very long, when it comes to that. Mr. Dalton says you'll be fit as a fiddle by next month. I had a long letter from E. Landis to-day. Show it to you after the party."

Hilda simply could not answer. Her lips refused to say the words. Jean was so sure of her. Perhaps this was the very hardest moment of her punishment, when she realized how much the plan had come to mean to Jean in her bereavement. She stood still, watching Jean go forward to meet little Miss DuBois and wondering how she could ever tell her of her failure.

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She caught her mother's eyes on her and moved to the tea-table mechanically. Mrs. Hare was standing by the tea-table. The long window into the back garden,—the rose-garden,—was directly behind her and the grey clouds which had been lowering all day lifted, showing a golden rift of sunset that made an aureole for her shapely head. Her lips were parted in a smile, and she was saying something to a tall, fine-looking man beside her which seemed to give them both pleasure. Hilda thought she looked wonderfully fresh and sweet in her bright earnestness.

“I haven't lost everything when I've got her,” she thought with a thrill of pride. “I was almost forgetting how wonderful she is. And it's the sort of loveliness that lasts. I wonder what she's saying to Mr. Skelton, for of course that is Esther Marie's father. His eyes are exactly like hers. They look as if they were talking about me. Oh, dear.”

It was not long before her curiosity was satisfied. Mrs. Hare greeted her with a still brighter smile as she made the introductions. “I have been talking it over with Mr. Skelton and we both feel that Esther Marie must have her way,” she said brightly, ignoring Hilda's startled look. “I told her to ask you, but she has made off with Jack and I suppose they are inspecting the latest additions to the snake



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colony. Mr. Skelton has a commission for you, my dear."

Hilda felt the room swim but she held herself steady. She tried to smile at Mr. Skelton as she replied, but it was a poor attempt.

"You're very kind and I should love to do it," she said awkwardly. "Esther Marie did tell me about it but she understands that I am not going to be an interior decorator, after all."

She could not say more without betraying herself.

Mr. Skelton looked puzzled but Mrs. Hare spoke quickly, forestalling Hilda's further explanation. "There is a mistake, Mr. Skelton, and it is my fault. Hilda seems to think that she must refuse Esther Marie's request,—not because she does not want to do it, but because of a compact between us. I know she would be very glad to do the work and so I accept your offer for her. You must talk it over after I have had a few words with her," and she turned to Hilda while he courteously withdrew to chat with Miss DuBois and Jean.

Mrs. Hare lowered her voice so that the others could not hear. "My dearest girl, you're not going to give up after all your preparation," she said with a little catch in her voice. "You must take the commission for the rooms at The Pines,—it's too fine a chance to be lost, and I believe you can do it

## THE VERDICT

well. I've been talking with Mr. Dalton and he says you've done splendidly."

"But ——" interposed Hilda, bewildered.

Her mother silenced her with a gesture. "I couldn't pronounce judgment all in a moment on the other matter," she went on seriously. "I wanted to get all the facts. I have questioned Page and Jack and Mr. Dalton, and I know about your promise to Hal. I am very glad to know that you kept back the facts that might plead for you. You told only the things that were against you. Page will be able to repay the money you spent on her,—and it is only justice to her that you should take it."

"I didn't expect it," began Hilda.

"Certainly not," returned her mother. "Your kindness would have meant little if you had. Nevertheless, the money will straighten your last month's account, and add something to the sum for those bills. Mr. Skelton's offer is liberal and if you accept it, you will be able to end the two months' probation with a clean slate. Isn't it worth trying for?"

Hilda could not realize for a moment that she was actually being offered salvation. She drew a deep breath as the tremendous fact dawned on her, and she put a trembling hand on her mother's where it lay on the edge of the tea-table. "Do you mean

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I'm to have a chance? Do you mean the partnership?" she stammered. "Oh, Mother, do you really mean that?"

Mrs. Hare's face was very tender as she answered. "I mean just that," she said softly. "Now go and see what Jean has to tell you. She wanted to see you about another piece of work, I believe. And after that, you must talk business with Mr. Skelton. Esther Marie seems to have evaporated entirely."

The sun broke through the last shred of cloud and flung a shaft of vivid gold straight into Hilda's dazzled eyes. She saw the world through a shining maze of happiness,—the circle of friendly faces, the familiar room, the lindens and the rose-garden.

She took up the plate her mother put into her hands and she looked into her mother's eyes with a deep, long look of silent rapture. She had no words large enough to ease her heart. It seemed to her, as their eyes met in understanding love, that the odor of strawberry jam floated out upon the sunlit air. She caught her breath in a little tremulous laugh.

"I—I hope you can trust me with the jam-pots this time," she said. "You'll all have to help me, though. I've had enough of trying it alone!"













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